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Making Choices? The Lives of Vocational College Students in China

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Abstract

Vocational education in China is failing to meet the need for upskilling its workforce to support the country's rapid industrial growth and this is impeding its ability to compete (Stewart, 2015). Recent policy changes to address this problem reflect government concerns (State Council, 2019a; 2019b). Since the start of the Reform Era in 1978, vocational education has been politically and financially neglected in favour of university expansion (Klorer and Stepan, 2015, p. 4). In China, vocational education is seen as inferior to academic routes (Yang, 2004; Zha, 2011) and positioned at the bottom of the educational hierarchy (Mok, 2001, Stewart, 2015). Vocational students are stereotyped as 'stupid and lazy' and suffer considerable prejudice in Chinese society (Woronov, 2015). Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, this study investigates the lived experiences of vocational youth in China, their capacity for individual choice, and their aspirations. The primary research question for this project is: *How are young people in China exercising "personal agency" in their educational and career choices within the existing social and educational structure?*

The quantitative data for this study comes from the responses to a small-scale questionnaire survey of vocational education students in two colleges in northern China. The qualitative data was gathered through 8 focus group and 18 interview sessions conducted in these two colleges. Additional interviews were also carried out with four teaching staff. Data was gathered on the students' choice-making processes, their opinions of their current vocational colleges and programmes, their perceptions of future employment opportunities, and their thoughts on the prevalent stereotyping against them. The findings are analysed and discussed utilising a theoretical framework which draws on three lenses: the individualisation thesis, a Foucauldian perspective, and Marxist political economy. Each with its own unique theoretical attributes, the lenses are utilised to make sense of the findings and inform our understanding of the relationship between personal choice-making and structural pressures within the context of the neoliberal influences on China since the end of the 1970s.

The findings reveal that for vocational youth, individual agency has been manufactured and governed with the aid of the mechanisms of examinations and performativity to produce neoliberal subjects. "Choosing" to attend vocational colleges on leaving secondary education can be regarded as a passive response to the increasing demand for educational

credentials in China's Reform Era. Once at the colleges, the students received only fragmented skills training and lacked the confidence and skills readiness to envisage long-term career progression. They were further burdened with the "vocational student" label, which is of itself pejorative, and serves to remind them it is their own failure that renders them unable to gain any sense of worth. This group of young people are managed through a meritocratic system which only values academic routes. The agency of the vocational students—their capacity to make choices and take responsibility—has been constructed and managed to meet the needs of the neoliberal market and China's export-oriented economy. The Chinese government has been strengthening the focus on vocational education over the past few years to meet a different need now which is to upskill the workforce (State Council, 2017). There is a dissonance between this goal and the neoliberal effects of the Reform Era which has produced vocational students not valued by society and lacking in self-worth.

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Acknowledgements

Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

The focus of this study is the lived experience of vocational college students in China, their capacity for individual choice, and their aspirations. Since the Chinese Reform Era began at the end of the 1970s, there has been a shift away from a well-supported socialist system, with young people transitioning to the 'iron rice bowl'[1] jobs upon completing their education (Cook, 2002; Hoffman, 2000, 2006), to a system which promotes creating 'your own rice bowl' (Bray, 2005, p. 179). Young people are now expected to be responsible for their own human capital accumulation in order to compete in the labour market. Whilst there has been a significant increase in investment in post-secondary education in China (Bai, 2006), this has not benefitted vocational students, who continue to be less able to compete in the labour market compared to those following academic routes (Ding, 2004).

Vocational colleges in China are positioned at the bottom of the educational hierarchy, absorbing the 'left-over' students with 'less good' academic records (Mok, 2001; Li, 2004; Yang, 2004; Zha, 2012; Liu and Wang, 2015). The students in these colleges receive limited attention and resources from central government compared to academically inclined students in higher level institutions (Wan, 2006). As a result, it is difficult for the colleges to employ and retain high-quality, practice-based, experienced teaching staff and to develop a curriculum responsive to the needs of the labour market (Ye, 1994; Huang, 2003).

There is a prevalent view that the students in these vocational colleges, being less academically inclined, are 'stupid and lazy' and 'failures'; hence they deserve only limited occupational opportunities (Woronov, 2015). Both public and private vocational colleges in China absorb students from across the socioeconomic status (SES) spectrum who fail to gain a place at university (Liu and Wang, 2015). Despite the fact that the private vocational colleges in China are more likely be attended by young people from wealthier families (Shen and Yan, 2006) while the public colleges attract those from poorer backgrounds (Xie and Wang, 2006), societal attitudes do not discriminate between vocational students on the basis of their SES or the type of college they attended. Rather, they discriminate on the basis of whether students follow an academic or a vocational pathway. The focus of this study is to

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[1] 'Iron rice bowl' refers to the job assignment system that comes with the lifetime guarantee of steady salaries and the benefits of a socialist welfare package (Hoffman, 2006, p. 551).

investigate the lives of these vocational students, including their choice-making experiences, irrespective of their SES and the college they attend.

As mentioned above, vocational students are subjected to negative stereotyping in Chinese society (Ling, 2015; Woronov, 2015). In this way, the structural constraints on the students and their futures are rendered invisible, 'subsidising' as individual failures (Bauman, 2006). Even though China's vocational education is not meeting China's need for skilled manpower (Stewart, 2015), few scholars have shown interest in the experiences of vocational students or questioned the assumptions at the heart of the discouraging stereotyping (Woronov, 2015). This project aims to help address this dearth of research. Moreover, this study is most timely given that China aimed to reform its vocational education framework since the 18th National Congress in 2012 (Shi, 2012).

Choosing a vocational college or vocational programme can be theorised as part of young people's individualisation processes. According to the individualisation thesis, the self can therefore be represented as a do-it-yourself project (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Young people are compelled to assume the role of makers of their own livelihoods. They may make choices at an individual level, but their life chances remain highly structured and highly predictable (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). As Beck argues, these individualisation processes, which are institutionally structured, are also increasingly institutionally dependent, and thus increasingly open to institutionally generated risks. The consequences of these risks for individual biographies emerge as if they are the result of individual decision-making (Kelly, 2001; Dawson, 2012). Young people are 'likely to blame themselves for any lack of success' (Ball et al., 2000; Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; te Riele, 2004). Existing research into the individualisation process of young people primarily focuses on the Global North (Woodman and Wyn, 2014) and has not yet explored the detailed empirical evidence relating to young people's day-to-day experiences in China. Thus, this study aims to explore how and why vocational college students in China make their educational and career choices within the current social and educational structures. It focuses on Chinese vocational education in both the private and public (state-funded) sectors. The following section introduces the research questions for this study.

1.2 Research questions

<u>The Primary Research Question is:</u> How are young people in China exercising "personal agency" in their educational and career choices within the existing social and educational structure?

<u>The Supplementary Research Questions are:</u>

1. What are students' experiences of choosing a vocational college and programme?
2. How do young people experience attending vocational college? and what are their perspectives on the vocational programmes as preparation for the world of work?
3. What are vocational students' perspectives of their future career possibilities?
4. How do vocational students compare themselves with those following academic routes?
5. In what ways does social theory help us explain the impact of the economic/social structure on the experiences of young people in vocational colleges?

1.3 Methodology

In order to investigate the above questions, the present study adopted a mixed methods approach and gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data comes from a small-scale questionnaire survey of vocational education students in two selected colleges in northern China, while the qualitative data is gathered through 8 focus groups and 18 interview sessions conducted in these two colleges. Additional interviews are carried out with the teaching staff. The participants discussed their previous educational experience, their choice-making processes, their opinions about vocational colleges and programmes, and their perceptions of their future employment opportunities.

1.4 The focus of this study

Much has been written in the literature demonstrating that young people's agency is often structurally constrained by their social economic status (Ashton and Field, 1976; Willis, 1977; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Pugsley, 1998; Ball et al., 2000; ;Shen and Yan, 2006; Kim et al., 2016; Kim and Gewirtz, 2019). In China, since the start of the Reform Era in 1978, radical social and economic policies have resulted in dramatic changes in social stratification (Lu, 1989; Li, 2000). At the same time, increasing education inequality has emerged, apparently favouring some of the most advantaged social groups (Zhou et al., 1998; Yao, 2003; Zheng, 2003; Li, 2006; Wan, 2006). The current exam system, especially the College Entrance Exam (CEE), functions as a sorting mechanism (Liu, 2016). The public vocational colleges, located at the bottom of the post-secondary educational hierarchy in

China, tend to attract students from low social economic status (SES) families (Xie and Wang, 2006). Young people's "decisions" to attend vocational colleges may be a consequence of this sorting, especially for those in the public colleges (see Appendix 6). However, as mentioned in Section 1.1, in spite of the significant differences in their SES, the students at both private and public vocational colleges share similar educational experiences and face similar negative societal stereotyping. It is important to note here that the focus of this study is the impact of the structural limitations of the education system, and of the wider societal attitudes on vocational students, irrespective of their social class.

1.5 Theoretical framework

With the aim of exploring the experiences of vocational youth in China and how they make decisions within the existing social and educational structures, a theoretical framework was constructed both to inform the discussion and to contribute to the explanatory power of the selected social theories, especially when explaining the connection between structural and individual factors (Research Question 5). Three theoretical perspectives have contributed to the construction of this framework: the individualisation thesis (e.g. Beck, 1992), the Foucauldian perspective, and Marxian political economy. Each with their own unique theoretical attributes, the three perspectives are drawn together and utilised as lenses through which to analyse the research data and inform an understanding of the relationship between personal choice-making, and social and economic factors. In this study, these three theoretical perspectives are contextualised within the neoliberal economic transformation that has taken place in China since the end of the 1970s.

Since the introduction of sweeping economic reforms in 1978, China has impressively reduced poverty in both rural and urban areas (Pei, 2018). It has 'a sustained growth rate unparalleled in human history' (Harvey, 2005, p. 1). However, the Reform Era witnessed a redistribution of wealth and income within Chinese society, realised by 'accumulation by dispossession'[2] (Harvey, 2003, 2005). Researchers have also observed a redesigning of the official public discourse since the reform, which has involved concealing, and even condoning, certain forms of suffering and social inequality (Shue and Wong, 2007). Individual choices must be made within an excessively aggressive culture of 'competition' (Shue and Wong, 2007; Ong and Zhang, 2008). Certain public discourses on poverty and individual responsibility promote attitudes that have plainly worked to exclude, rather than

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[2] The continuation and proliferation of accumulation practices which Marx treated as 'primitive' or 'original' during the rise of capitalism (Harvey, 2005, p. 159)

include, those who are entering the headlong race toward the glittering rewards of affluent modernity from positions of disadvantage (Murphy, 2004; Shue and Wong, 2007). This study will focus on the redesigned public discourse in an era of transformation within which young people are negotiating their choices.

1.6 Defining terms: "vocational education", "agency" and "structure"

Mention has already been made in this study of the terms "vocational education", "structure" and "agency". This section discusses some of the ways in which these terms will be used and clarifies their meaning in relation to the present project.

For the term "vocational education"[3], the present study has taken up the definition provided in the *Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China*, which refers to providing students with the necessary vocational knowledge, skills, and professional ethics to engage in certain occupations (Ministry of Education, 1996). (This term will be further discussed in Section 2.2.1)

With reference to the term "structure", Karl Marx writes of 'the economic structure of society' as being 'the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness' (1859). According to Marx, the economic structure of society influences the general process of social, political and intellectual life. 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness' (1859). For contemporary sociological references to structure, Émile Durkheim argues that parts of society are interdependent and that this interdependency imposes structure on the behaviour of institutions and their members (Durkheim, 2014). According to Beck (1992), structures consist of the structural and situational influences that shape individual biographies. These may include family influences, education and training system, labour market, and so on (Beck, 1992). Previous studies of youth transitions suggest that some structural factors have an impact on young people's choices and progressions (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). Of particular importance in the context of this study are China's economic, social and educational structures.

In youth studies, the concept of "agency" is hotly contested (Côté, 2014b, p. 60), carrying different meanings in different conceptual frameworks (Furlong et al., 2011; Coffey and

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[3] Vocational education is referred to as "vocational education and training" (VET) in many contexts. In this study, the term "vocational education" is a direct translation of the Chinese term "*Zhiye Jiaoyu*", which is equivalent to VET.

Farrugia, 2014; Biesta and Tedder, 2016). White and Wyn define "agency" as 'the exercise of will and conscious action on the part of human subjects', and analyse different dimensions of agency as it is 'by and large inscribed within existing social relations' (1998). The freedom to choose is also regarded as an important ingredient in the notion of youth agency (Thomson et al., 2004; Brannen and Nilsen, 2005). From a lifecourse perspective, Biesta and Tedder perceive agency as the ability to exert control over and give direction to one's life (2016). Subcultural studies (e.g. Willis, 1977; Hebdige, 1979) have also made important contributions to our conceptions of agency by highlighting young people's resistance as a means by which they manifest their agency and react to class oppression (Raby, 2005). For the present study, agency is perceived as young people's capacity to make choices and take responsibility.

1.7 Positionality

Before discussing the structure of the thesis, it is helpful to provide a brief description of my own position as a researcher and how my personal and professional experiences have influenced my decision to pursue this study as well as the choice of research sample.

I had been working as a teacher at a Chinese vocational college (Seaside College) for three years, before starting my PhD. I observed that my students appeared extremely unmotivated in class. Many of them reported that they were constantly feeling lost and did not have any plans for the future. I felt compelled to help them and became interested in finding out what was going on behind their perceived impediments and the negative perceptions of themselves. This led me to investigate the lives of vocational students, their aspirations and agency, as the focus of my PhD.

The data in this study is collected from two different vocational colleges in China: Seaside and Riverside. As I taught at Seaside College before, I became an 'insider' researcher when collecting data there, which allows me to gain more rapid and complete acceptance from the participants (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Although insider researchers can sometimes get lost in terms of 'their myopia and their inability to make the familiar strange' (Hawkins, 1990, p. 417), they usually have considerable credibility and rapport with the subjects of their studies (Mercer, 2007).

1.8 Structure of the thesis

The present study consists of nine chapters. The current chapter has provided an introduction to the research, set out the core aims and arguments, and stated the questions to be investigated. Chapter 2 provides a critical review of the relevant literature on both the "structural" and the "individual" factors of the choice-making process among vocational youth in China, as well as on the theoretical connection between the structural context and the individual dimensions. The section addressing the structural context reviews the societal perspectives of vocational education, possible definitions, key issues, and relevant research on Chinese vocational education. As vocational youth in China have been streamed by the educational system, relevant studies on the effect and rationale of sorting or streaming students are reviewed. The section also illustrates "the bigger picture", i.e. the economics of youth transition, including how education could be linked to the labour market. It problematises human capital theory and situates Chinese youth in the context of a "market mechanism" in the Reform Era. For the individual dimensions, the chapter reviews a body of literature that seeks to understand student experiences of vocational education. It also discusses the idea of youth transitions—how young people navigate their way under the impact of social change in late modernity. It then critically analyses the concept of "youth agency", discussing some of the latest controversies and developments in the field. The last section of this chapter identifies theoretical connections between structural and individual factors. It discusses the three theoretical perspectives selected for my theoretical framework and their relevance when applied to the context of Chinese society.

Chapter 3 presents the paradigm adopted and describes the mixed methods approach used for this study. Explanations and justifications are presented for each data collection instrument. The chapter also provides details regarding the data collection in the pilot study, as well as the ways in which quantitative and qualitative data were analysed and integrated.

Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 present the research findings. Chapter 4 focuses on the findings relating to the students' experiences of choosing a vocational college and programme. The findings presented in Chapter 5 concern the students' experiences in vocational colleges, including what they think about the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teaching staff, and internships. Chapter 6 examines the students' perceptions of the job market and their future career possibilities. Chapter 7 investigates the construction of the stereotypes along with the students' perspectives of the stereotyping.

Chapter 8 discusses the key findings of this research in order to situate them in relation to the existing literature and theoretical framework. The first five sections discuss the six research questions with reference to the relevant research and theories. The final section contributes to the discussion of the primary research question.

Lastly, Chapter 9 concludes the paper by bringing together the various themes emerging during the study. It outlines the research's contribution to the knowledge in the area of vocational education and youth studies. It also highlights the new vocational education policies recently initiated in China, which reflects the Government's determination to address the problems. The last section reflects on the research's limitations, provides recommendations for further study, and discusses policy implications.

Chapter 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical review of the extant international and Chinese literature on the structural context of young people in vocational education, the individual dimensions of "choice", and the theoretical connections between the structural context and the individual dimensions. The first section considers several structural issues, including how vocational education is defined and operates in various contexts, and how it functions within educational, political and economic systems. This section also reviews the Chinese historical context, as well as current issues concerning vocational education in China. The section addressing the structural context is aimed at illuminating our understanding of how the lives of Chinese vocational students are positioned within social, economic and educational structures compared to other countries. The second section of this literature review considers individual dimensions, and discusses the ways in which young people experience vocational education and negotiate their transitions. It also explores the concept of "agency" in the debates in youth studies. The last section of the chapter sets out to explain in detail the theoretical framework created for this study, in order to theorise the connections between the structural context and the individual dimensions of the lives of young people.

2.2 The Structural Context

2.2.1 Perspectives on vocational education

Defining "vocational education"

Before exploring the issues related to vocational matters, it is important to first look at what is meant by "vocational education". It is problematic to define the term using a single characteristic. Of all the educational fields, the vocational education sector has the broadest range of instruction; its formation, transformation and associations are the products of impetuses within countries or even regional societal subsystems (Greinhart, 2005). According to Gavin Moodie, there is no single characteristic that can consistently identify vocational education in different jurisdictions or even in the same jurisdiction over different historical periods (2008, p. 41). Of the key educational fields, vocational education is probably the least homogeneous and it varies in terms of its purposes, institutions, participants and programmes (Billett, 2011, p. 4).

The purpose of vocational education has been variously defined. For some scholars, it includes finding ways of assisting individuals to identify the occupation to which they are suited and the initial development of the capacities required for that occupation (Dewey, 1916). Moreover, vocational education is said to prepare and equip learners for the world of work (Giroux, 1985; Skillback et al., 1994). With the focus on developing particular occupational capacities, many vocational education systems have been established by nations with the intention of addressing various social problems, such as a lack of skilled labour (Greinhart, 2005), youth unemployment (Dewey, 1916), and the disengagement of young people from society (Gonon, 2009). However, for scholars like Thompson (1973) and Elias (1995), vocational education should have both general and vocational-specific purposes. It should be viewed as part of general education and include exposure to the broader cultural meaning of work as well as technical training in a particular occupation skill or technique (Elias, 1995, p. 189). The American educator William Du Bois also suggests that 'the best learning is more than merely practical since it seeks to apply itself, not simply to the present mode of living, but the larger, broader life which lives today, perhaps, in theory only, but which may come to realization tomorrow' (1902, p. 81). For Du Bois, vocational education also has the important goal of preparing for lives beyond education and the ongoing development of individuals throughout their working lives (1902).

Besides possessing various purposes, vocational education can also encompass a diverse range of participants and courses. As Wolf states in the UK *Review of Vocational Education* (2011) (known as *The Wolf Report*):

> There is no formal definition of "vocational education" in England, and the term is applied to programmes as different as the highly selective, competitive and demanding apprenticeships offered by large engineering companies and the programmes which recruit highly disaffected young people with extremely low academic achievement. (Wolf, 2011, p. 23)

Whilst the diversity of vocational education makes describing it unitarily difficult, scholars have devised a variety of definitions which capture the distinctiveness of the field on some level (Billet, 2011, p. 25). For instance, Skilbeck et al. (1994) view it as comprising 'those educational functions and processes which purport to prepare and equip individuals and groups for working life whether or not in the form of paid employment' (p. 9). In turn, Giroux (1985) describes vocational education as 'a practice that emphasizes the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes that relate to a student's future participation within the economic sector of one's community and nation' (p. iv). West and Steedman

(2003) state that vocational education is 'a system of education which has, as its subject matter, knowledge used within certain trades, occupations or professions' (p. 1). Within all of these definitions, vocational education is regarded as the provision of education that prepares and equips learners with the skills and capacities for work.

Countries and organisations can also offer us different definitions of vocational education. In the Australian context, the obvious characterisation of vocational education and training (VET) is that it provides people with the occupational training required by enterprises and industries, a definition that does not distinguish VET from higher education, which provides training for occupations such as medicine, engineering and accounting (Karmel, 2011). In Ireland, however, vocational colleges are clearly distinguished from higher education institutions. What characterises vocational colleges in Ireland is:

> a) the provision of course programmes of shorter duration than those provided by universities, b) the practical orientation of their curricula, c) their responsiveness to industry and business, d) the limited range of subjects on offer, mostly in engineering and business studies, e) little or only applied research, and f) heavy teaching loads for faculty. (White, 2001)

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) defines technical and vocational education and training (TVET) as 'comprising education, training and skills development relating to a wide range of occupational fields, production, services and livelihoods' (UNESCO, 2015). This is similar to the definition in the Australian context (Karmel, 2011), which also has an occupational focus.

Given its strong relevance to the Chinese vocational education system, the present study has taken up the definition provided in the *Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China*, which refers to providing students with the necessary vocational knowledge, skills, and professional ethics to engage in certain occupations (Ministry of Education, 1996). This definition is in line with the above-mentioned distinctiveness of vocational education in that it focuses on the development of skills and capacities for various occupations. The present study investigates what the term "vocational" means to Chinese vocational students and how they perceive their programmes in terms of how they provided 'the necessary vocational knowledge, skills and professional ethics' to prepare them for the world of work.

Institutional arrangements for vocational education

The institutional arrangements for vocational education are established in various different ways across the globe. The institutionalised differences in terms of educational values, norms, and governance, as well as in labour markets, have led to the development of some markedly contrasting cases (Powell et al., 2012). This section discusses these differences and illustrates the institutional arrangements established for Chinese vocational education.

For example, in the 'coordinated market economies' (Hall and Soskice, 2001) or 'highly vocationally oriented countries' (Di Stasio et al., 2016), such as Germany and Austria, there is a sufficiently stable and coordinated labour market to encourage employers and employees to invest heavily in vocationally specific skills (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2017), not to mention strong trade unions and a tradition of corporatist cooperation (Bosch and Charest, 2009). In dual apprenticeship programmes, apprentices divide their time between engaging in tasks in workplaces, often as employees, and being taught in vocational schools in short blocks of attendance (Billett, 2011, p. 23). The vocational qualifications reflect the curricular needs of stakeholders, are standardised and widely portable in the labour market, and lead to relatively good job prospects (Di Stasio et al., 2016). However, Powell et al. (2012) found that the dual system is no longer so successful in providing attractive training opportunities to the majority of young people leaving secondary schooling, as the demand for training has grown far beyond what firms provide. The less-educated youth risk not being able to garner a place in the dual system and are likely to remain on the margin of the labour market (Solga, 2008).

In contrast, in the 'liberal market economies of Anglophone countries' (Hall and Soskice, 2001) or 'less vocationally oriented contexts' (Di Stasio et al., 2016), such as the USA and the UK, the vocational education systems emphasise general and employability skills, as well as task-specific "competencies" because employers are reluctant to invest in education and training. The reason employers frequently give for this reluctance is that they have no guarantee that other employers will not poach their employees rather than investing in training themselves (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2017). In these contexts, vocational education systems are normally college-based as in the further education colleges of the UK and the community colleges of the US (Billet, 2011, p. 24). Liberal market economies also place a greater share of the responsibility on students and workers for making themselves ready to meet the needs of employers. To do this they are required to invest in their skills training as a form of insurance in fluid and unpredictable labour markets (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2017, p. 16). Compared to the German system, for example, vocational education systems in liberal

market economies lack institutional foundations (Di Stasio et al., 2016), and are largely viewed as a remedial option for the under-achievers (Solga, 2002).

Besides having diverse purposes and definitions, vocational education is also arranged and viewed differently at different times within the same country. For example, in China, vocational education used to hold a higher status and enjoyed greater respect from society during the Socialist Era (Unger, 1982) than it does in the current Reform Era (Thøgersen, 1990). In the Socialist Era, the economy was strictly planned and coordinated (Unger, 1982), while in the current Reform Era, the logics of supply and demand as well as market competition have been generated (Hoffman, 2006, p. 551)

The Division

Vocational education has been subjected to sets of long-standing societal sentiments and precepts, which consistently underrate its potential and fail to acknowledge its diversity (Billet, 2011, p. 22).

The practice of dividing the curriculum into academic and vocational aspects and treating the latter as a default for those deemed to be ill-suited to the former is an enduring staple of educational systems (Lewis, 1998, p. 284). As Silver and Brennan note, 'education and training, theory and practice, the liberal and the vocational—the polarities have centuries of turbulent history' (1988, p. 3). The original source of division might be found in Plato's distinction between 'genuine knowledge' (acquired through rational reflection) and 'mere opinion' (acquired for specific purposes) (Schofield, 1972, pp. 149-150). Similarly, in *Politics*, Aristotle values disinterested theory above applied practice, which is similar to the vocational/academic discourse in modern schooling (1877).

The same tradition can be found in Imperial China (221 BC—1912 AD). Scholar-officials, or '*shidafu*', were members of the ruling class educated as scholars of the classics and experts in morality. They administered Imperial China and occupied the highest positions in the social hierarchy, above the peasants, craftsmen and merchants (Münch and Risler, 1987, p. 23). S*hidafu* were regarded as superior people (*junzi*) by Confucius. Xiong argues that 'the pervasive Confucian influences are seen to have a negative impact on employment opportunities for vocational graduates and generally to accord a lesser status to vocational institutions in Chinese society' (Xiong, 2011, p. 496). The social prestige and recognition given to scholar-officials within Confucianism motivates students to become civil servants

rather than skilled workers. Employers prefer to hire graduates with academic degrees rather than ones holding vocational and occupational qualifications (Xiong, 2011).

Undoubtedly, discrimination against vocational education has been a longstanding challenge to its development in both Western and Chinese societies. In some countries, efforts have been made to increase parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications.

Parity of Esteem

In recent years, a significant amount of attention has been paid to creating parity of esteem in a number of countries. For example, in the UK, the Government released its *Industrial Strategy* in 2017, which includes 'plans for a radical overhaul of technical education to address its historic undervaluation in the UK and provide a credible alternative to the academic route for young people who choose not to go to university' (UK Government, 2017). Prime Minister Theresa May stated that the action 'means boosting technical education and ensuring we extend the same opportunity and respect we give university graduates to those people who pursue technical routes' (UK Government, 2017). *Industrial Strategy* aims to establish a technical education system that rivals the best in the world, to stand alongside UK's world-class higher education system. The initiative includes publishing a new *T level* action plan, injecting significant amounts of capital to establish prestigious institutes of technology, tackling shortages of STEM skills, and other approaches to strengthening vocational education (2017).

In April 2017, the Apprenticeship Levy started to affect employers in all sectors in the UK with the aim of developing vocational skills and of increasing the quantity and quality of apprenticeships. The levy on UK employers aims to help deliver new apprenticeships and support quality training by putting employers at the centre of the system. It has committed to an additional 3 million apprenticeship starts in England by 2020 (UK Government, 2016).

In Scotland, which has a distinct VET system within the UK, the Government highlights its goal of 'achieving parity of esteem between academic and vocational learning, recognizing that vocational learning is a valuable alternative to the academic pathway and important to all' (Scottish Government, 2007, p. 5). Scottish schools, through programmes such as *Higher Still, Determined to Succeed, Curriculum for Excellence* and *Skill for Work*, are committed to promoting vocational learning as an opportunity for pupils of all levels of academic ability (Edward et al., 2008, p. vi). In response to the recommendations in the *Education Working for All* report, the Scottish Government initiated a seven-year national programme

Developing the Young Workforce in 2014 (Scottish Government, 2014). It involves a range of approaches to encourage more young people to complete vocational routes, ensuring a wide range of work-related learning and high-quality vocational pathways in schools. It aims to enhance the perception of Modern Apprenticeships and other vocational and work-based learning. In *Developing the Young Workforce*, the Government also plans to expand the Modern Apprenticeships to create more opportunities and to better align the programme with key sectors and areas of economic growth (Scottish Government, 2014).

As can be seen from the above, there has been a significant increase in the attention given to vocational learning and its value has risen among various stakeholders in the UK. A similar trend can be found in Australia, where policy makers have launched two pilot programmes to locate the vocational education system within a broader context of labour market and economic development issues. (The intellectual ideas that have informed these initiatives will be discussed in Section 2.2.3.) One programme is the Skill Ecosystem National Project in New South Wales, and the other is Skill Formation Strategies (SFS) in Queensland (Payne, 2007). The pilot SFS project has been successfully expanded to 60 projects (Eddington and Toner, 2012). Rather than simply supplying skills or training to industry, these projects reinvigorate industry responsibility for skill development and utilisation (Payne, 2007). In Europe, where the aim is also to align vocational education with labour market needs and engage different social partners, the French Government started to reform its vocational education system in May 2018 (Ministry of National Education, 2018). The reform will offer more places in vocational education programmes and expand apprenticeships in all vocational high schools, which alternate periods of classroom-based learning with in-company training (Cedefop, 2018).

In China, the recent development in vocational education shares some similarities with the Australian initiatives in terms of integrating vocational education within a wider agenda (e.g. State Council, 2018); yet, at the same time, this sector has been tackling its own complexities and problems that have arisen through China's own particular history and social discourse. The issue of vocational education in China will be further explored in the following section.

Vocational education in China

After decades of expansion and development, China's vocational education system is now the largest in the world (Zhang and Xu, 2013). There are more than 15,000 vocational institutions at the secondary and tertiary levels combined, catering for over 22 million

students at secondary level and almost 10 million at post-secondary level. This is equal to 47.6% of total tertiary education enrolments and 47.6% of secondary (Zhang and Xu, 2013).

This massive expansion has not resolved the shortage of high-level skilled workers in China. According to National Industry Development Plans, in the electronics and information industry, of the 8.5 million employees, only 50% are classified as skilled; in equipment manufacturing, 60% of the 16 million workers are classified as skilled; and in the steel industry, more than 25% of workers are junior high-school leavers without additional training (Shi, 2012). The shortage of high-level skilled workers threatens the country's economic development as it can lead to low quality, low efficiency, raw material waste, and rejected products (Cai, 1997). It is estimated that 30% of Chinese products do not pass quality tests. Many advanced equipment lines cannot operate at full capacity due to a lack of qualified technicians or maintenance workers (Stewart, 2015). 'Made in China' has become mostly synonymous with low quality compared with 'Made in Japan, Korea or Germany' (2015, p. 11). According to the Skills Toward Employment and Productivity (STEP) Survey in 2012, among employers in Kunming, only 56% of the firms agreed that the current vocational education system adequately met the skill needs of employers. More specifically, as many as 65% of the firms agreed that the current vocational education system did not produce enough workers with up-to-date knowledge of methods, materials, and technology (Liang and Chen, 2014, p. 82).

In 2015, the State Council published a strategy paper called 'Made in China 2025', which outlined China's path to becoming an industrial superpower. According to the paper, by 2025, China aims to have reduced the gap with established industrial nations in the areas of innovation, quality and efficiency (State Council, 2015). However, the discrepancy between market demand and the supply of skilled qualified workers worries the Chinese leadership. Vocational training is the Achilles' heel of the restructuring of the Chinese economic model (Klorer and Stepan, 2015, p. 3). Over the last few decades, the Government has enacted a series of policies to promote vocational education. In 1996, a new Vocational Education Law sought to further expand vocational education. One stated goal was that half of secondary students should be enrolled in a vocational route in order to meet the nation's technical and skills needs (Shi, 2013). In 2005, 2008 and 2010, the central government issued *Decisions to Vigorously Promote the Development of Vocational Education in China* at different levels, including secondary, tertiary, and adult education (State Council, 2005). In November 2008, Premier Wen specifically announced that, during the 15th Five-Year Plan period, the central

government would invest 10 billion RMB in vocational education, saying it was to be 'used to support developing practical vocational training bases, improving teaching equipment, and assisting students from disadvantaged families to access vocational education' (cited in Luo, 2013). The *Decisions* also called for 'developing 1,000 advanced model vocational high schools and 100 model vocational colleges to train high-quality talent' (2005). Those policies were an indication of the strategic importance and urgency of vocational education in China on a national level.

In recent years, the Chinese Government has put forward a series of strategies to better align vocational education with the needs of industry. At the end of 2017, the State Council published its *Plans on Deepening the Integration of Industry and Vocational Education* (State Council, 2017). In 2018, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and four other major governmental departments were asked by the State Council to enact *The Guidelines on Promoting the Cooperation of Vocational School and Enterprise*, with the aim of making industry and business the driver of vocational education and improving students' skills and capacities (State Council, 2018). Similar to *Industrial Strategy* in the UK, the *Plans* and the *Guidelines* published in China also aimed to develop a highly skilled workforce by establishing an industry-driven vocational education sector.

However, in spite of the political ambitions and the financial resources lavished on this educational sector, Chinese vocational education must still overcome a series of issues and challenges before it can achieve these goals. One of the purposes of this study is to investigate the tension between the high level of investment in Chinese vocational education and the persistently severe shortage of skilled labour faced by the Chinese economy. The following section offers a critical discussion of the literature on the role of vocational education in China.

Vocational learning—an inferior alternative

Although vocational education in China can be traced back to the early twentieth century (Schulte, 2013), the current vocational education system is based on the structure established in the 1950s during the Socialist Era when vocational education was greatly valued. Vocational education was delivered by large work units (*danwei*), the major form of urban employment during the times of the planned economy (Thøgersen, 1990). In the planned economy, graduates of *danwei*-affiliated vocational schools were automatically assigned to

lifelong jobs in their units; this was known as the 'iron rice bowl' system since the workers' livelihoods were guaranteed over the course of their lifetimes (Unger, 1982; Thøgersen, 1990). However, at the end of the 1980s, China's leadership introduced market mechanisms for job allocation after graduation. It removed vocational students from the *danwei* system, forcing them into the newly created open labour market to seek jobs (Lewin and Xu, 1989). As a result of both the open labour market and the expansion of higher education, 'educational desires' (Kipnis, 2011) in China were transformed, thus greatly increasing pressure on students to gain higher levels of educational credentials, particularly in the form of university degrees. Educational credentials are used as a tool to distinguish between job applicants in an increasingly competitive market. Mid-level managerial jobs, technical jobs, and skilled jobs, which 30 years ago would have been filled by vocational education graduates, are now increasingly reserved for university graduates (Hansen and Woronov, 2013). Employers believe that if their staff hold higher levels of educational credentials, this represents higher quality, and therefore a better reputation and status for their company (Zhang, 2008).

With the *danwei*-affiliated vocational schools becoming obsolete, in the Reform Era employers, especially organisations in the state-owned sector (Li, 2005), have tended to use internal training as the main mode of training delivery (Chen et al., 2009). In-house mentoring has been adopted by most firms as a means of formal skill development (Cooke, 2012), replacing the dominant compulsory apprenticeships of the Socialist Era (Li and Sheldon, 2010). Employers believe that the vocational education system produces poor-quality graduates, deficient in technical skills and work experience (Li and Sheldon, 2010).

The breakdown of the 'iron rice bowl' system and the major shift in the mode of skill formation has entrenched the belief in people that being a worker or technician offers no job security and a lower social status in the market economy in China (Zhang, 2008). In this context, there is no good reason why Chinese parents should encourage their only child[4] to go into vocational education if they have the option of taking the academic path (Stewart, 2015). A survey published by *Beijing Youth News* showed that only 1.3% of the 344 parents interviewed would agree to send their children to vocational education and have them become a factory worker (cited in Zhang, 2008).

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[4] The purpose of one-child policy (1979-2015) was to limit the great majority of family units in the country to one child each (Ren and Edwards 2017).

Vocational education no longer enjoys the deep respect from society it once did in the planned economy. It has for many years, been politically and financially neglected in favour of university expansion (Klorer and Stepan, 2015, p. 4), and it now has a lowly place in the Chinese educational hierarchy. The current structure of the Chinese tertiary education system can be broken down into three tiers: the first tier (*yiben*), the second tier (*erben*), and the third tier (*sanben*). The first tier consists of the most prestigious public research universities, which belong to "Project 211" and "Project 985". Provincial and local institutions sit in the middle of the three tiers, acting as the major providers of higher education; vocational colleges are largely located at the bottom and focus on vocationally oriented programmes (Liu and Wang, 2015).

The pyramid system has inevitably raised concerns about inequality in terms of resource allocation and disparity in education. While the top echelon universities are allocated special treatment with the aim of achieving global excellence, the provincial institutions and vocational colleges absorb most of the increased enrolment yet they have received no significant increase in resource allocation (Wan, 2006). The enrolment at elite national universities grew from 1.36 million in 1997 to 1.63 million in 2005, while provincial and local institutions increased their enrolment from 1.79 million to 11.89 million over the same period (Ma, 2009). The gap in per student expenditure between elite national and local institutions increased from 3,708 RMB in 1998 to 8,196 RMB in 2006 (Liu and Wang, 2015). It is undeniable that Project 211 and Project 985 could act as catalysts to incentivise higher education institutions to enhance their quality so as to be included in the "Top 100" or "Top 43". However, the lower-tiered institutions have found themselves at a disadvantage when competing with the top universities (Mok, 2001).

Access to any form of tertiary education in China is mainly determined by the 'National College Entrance Examination' (CEE, or '*gaokao*'), which are high-stakes academic-based exams. The top-tier research universities are able to recruit the students with the highest exam scores. Then, the second-tier provincial universities recruit students with the lower scores. At the bottom of this educational caste system lie the vocational institutions which accept the 'left-over' students (Zha, 2012).

Therefore, vocational colleges, which are considered the highest stage of vocational learning, are both a dependent part and the bottom level of the higher education system (Yang, 2004). Vocational education is treated as inferior higher education, non-formal higher education, or

higher education just for low-score students (Yang, 2004; Ling, 2015). The performance of vocational colleges is evaluated in the same way as academic higher education (Luo, 2013) but as Yang argues, the hierarchical selection system never works for vocational students as it only adopts academic standards (2004). Some researchers indicate that vocational studies are mostly chosen by default or as a last resort, a fallback for those who have failed their exams, rather than out of personal or family interest (Zhang, 2008; Hansen and Woronov, 2013; Luo, 2013; Woronov 2015; Klorer and Stepan, 2015). Students' choice of vocational college is merely a response to the demands for ever more educational credentials—both by employers who are seeking 'trained' employees, and by families seeking 'face' (trying to maintain some respect) (Hansen and Woronov, 2013). Young people prefer to enter the job market with a vocational credential rather than no degree at all, regardless of whether or not that credential comes with actual skills (Hansen and Woronov, 2013). The 'upgrading' opportunity policy that allows vocational college students to enter academic institutions by passing exams forces vocational curricula and teaching to be aligned with those of academic institutions to meet students' demands and aspirations for 'promotion' (Sun and Wang, 2007).

Bad students go to vocational colleges

Since those who enrol in vocational college are the 'left-over' students with 'less good' academic records (Mok, 2001; Li, 2004; Yang, 2004; Zha, 2012; Liu and Wang, 2015), vocational students are generally considered to be 'stupid and lazy' or 'failures', and hence they deserve only limited occupational opportunities as they are 'bad students' (Ling, 2015; Woronov, 2015). Vocational students are failures because 'commonsense logic in China tends to equate exam results with an individual's moral and personal value' (Woronov, 2015, p. 2). Test scores have become more than just a quantitative expression of educational achievement; they condense and represent social value, meaning that young people increasingly *are* their test scores (Woronov, 2015, p. 13). Woronov calls this 'numeric capital, the regime of value that measures the accumulation of young people's exam scores that embody and represent social value, a economism that is sedimented within the bodies of the nation's youth' (2015, p. 14).

This notion of numeric capital is also found in China's human resource management system. Salary standards and promotion criteria are based on the level of degree one receives. Ning Zhang believes the problem of underappreciation of vocational learning is rooted in an badly structured human resource system (Zhang, 2008). She cites a report in *The People's Daily*,

the Government's top official newspaper, that over 92% of Congress representatives have a university degree and over half of them have postgraduate degrees (Zhang, 2008, p. 212). The report explains:

> A People's Congress representative is a type of position, which requires the representative to possess a certain ability and competence to carry out the duties of this position. The education credential level of this Congress representative cohort has improved. This means an improvement in the competence level of this cohort. This also lays a more solid foundation that enables the representatives to carry out their duties and play their roles more effectively. (People's Daily Reporter, 2008)

Government media officially admits that the level of one's education qualifications is regarded as a decisive benchmark for one's competence and value. The ideology of the exam system, as a meritocracy, appears to naturally reward clever, hardworking students. It is the responsibility of individual youth and their families to accumulate numeric capital, i.e. exam scores, and, as a result, improve their futures. The value of individual accountability and achievement are constantly reinforced by the school and the media, yet, in reality, individuals often remain powerless (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). The test scores of vocational students tend to be in the lowest percentile and their vocational degrees are less preferred. According to the logic of this system, the fact that they have low numeric capital exposes the ways in which they did not invest their time appropriately or plan correctly for their future. Therefore, they are considered as 'stupid' and even 'low quality' (Woronov, 2015), and therefore deserve their limited occupational futures. This stereotype renders the structural constraints on the students invisible.

The issue of vertically differentiated levels of degrees is also discussed by Ding (2004). She argues that the problem of vocational students having inferior status is due to the stratified and hierarchical higher education system, which has led to the differentiated reception of higher education graduates in the job market. Ding investigated the comparative advantage of university graduates and vocational college graduates in China (2004). She cites the objectives of vocational colleges and universities as set out in the Higher Education Act of 1998, which emphasises the official view that vocational colleges and universities should be two different types of higher education. Graduates of these two types of education should have their own comparative advantages in the corresponding occupational domain (Ding, 2004). However, the empirical evidence does not support this official view. The comparative advantages of vocational education graduates are not apparent, and they are easily overtaken

by university graduates (Ding, 2004). Ding concludes that in China the major difference between university and vocational college education is in the level rather than in the type; vocational education is seen as a 'compression-type' of university education (Ding, 2004). The vertically differentiated system has consequently deprived vocational students of their competitive advantage in the labour market (Ding, 2004).

Vocational students' position in the hierarchy is the result of an educational and social structure which emphasises exams and education credentials. Vocational students are constantly subjected to discrimination by the mainstream societal sentiment in China. The present study aims to investigate the lived experiences of this particular group of young people within this unfavourable social and educational context.

Issues and problems within Chinese vocational education

The challenges faced by Chinese vocational education are not only rooted in its disadvantaged position in the educational hierarchy, but also stem from the issues and problems within the sector itself, such as poor training quality and weak linkage with industry.

Quality issues

There is evidence that although vocational education has achieved parity with that of academic education in terms of quantity, there remains a series of problems related to its quality (Xu, 2006; Shi, 2013; Stewart, 2015; Yi et al., 2018). Some claim that such an expansion in scale without considering quality will doubtless result in a slow suicide for vocational education (Xu, 2006). Yi et al. (2018) assessed the quality of 118 vocational schools in Henan province during the 2013/14 academic year. Their results indicate that the education provided by vocational education programmes led to few students gaining vocational or general skills, with only 10.1% students making significant progress in their vocational skills over a full academic year and 8.9% of students making gains in their general skills. They also found out that most student internships appeared to lack a clear educational purpose, with 68.2% of students reporting that their recent internships had nothing to do with their vocational education programme. As a result, more than 60% of students were dissatisfied with their vocational education schools (Yi et al., 2018). Similarly, a study conducted by Koo (2016) found that in Chongqing, the vocational student interns were used as cheap unskilled labour in factories, where they found no connection between their learning and the work.

Some institutions just borrow the academic curricula of the research universities and ignore practical skills (Shi, 2013). This trend of devocationalisation was also found by Woronov in her ethnographic research of two vocational schools in China. She observed that the content of the vocational classes was exceptionally academic—technical material was taught through theory, yet poorly linked to preparation for actual vocational needs (Woronov, 2015, p. 77). Woronov concluded that devocationalisation is a particular problem which leaves a vacuum at the centre of students' vocational education (2015, p. 79).

Possessing neither desirable academic degrees nor the practical skills that employers need, vocational education graduates have been facing an increasing amount of difficulty in the job market. Koo's research findings indicate that a large proportion of vocational students and graduates end up working on assembly lines in factories or in other unskilled jobs with low capacity for occupational upgrading (Koo, 2016).

School—Industry Links

Although employers and industry associations are sometimes consulted in the policymaking process, the consultation is often ad hoc, and the role of industry and employers remains advisory (Liang and Chen, 2014, p. 89). Stewart and her colleagues also found that in China, the connections to industry are weak compared with those in the best vocational education systems (Stewart, 2015). The graduates cannot be prepared adequately for the current job market. The researchers noted that organised work experiences in vocational institutions are typically arranged at the end of a course for only a few weeks and there is a huge disconnect between the vocational education system and employers (Stewart, 2015, p. 19). During the work experiences, vocational students are frequently given only simple tasks to perform, with rare mentoring or guidance provided. This makes it difficult to acquire any noteworthy practical qualifications (Klorer and Stepan, 2015, p. 5). Moreover, the curriculum does not reflect the demands of frontline production and services in a timely way (Shi, 2013). Consequently, the teaching outcomes never match the real demands and requirements of employers. The employers Stewart interviewed complained of new employees' inability to apply their knowledge, as well as their lack of applied experience and their reluctance to undertake hands-on work (2015, p. 20).

From the employers' point of view, industry has little incentive to provide systematic and sustained input to the management of vocational education schools. According to the STEP

Employer Survey, fewer than a quarter of firms are involved in curriculum development for training and educational institutions; even fewer are involved in the testing of students (Liang and Chen, 2014, p. 91). In light of the great employee fluctuations, many companies show little interest in increasing their involvement in this area. They criticise the high costs associated with the training of vocational apprentices who may or may not remain with the company in the long term (Klorer and Stepan, 2015, p. 4).

There is also a severe shortage of instructors with hands-on experience and a lack of cooperation between schools and enterprises (Zhang, 2009). The majority of the teachers in vocational institutions are 'graduates from research universities without practical experience' (Huang, 2003, p. 19). Most vocational education faculty do not come from industry; nor do they have industry experience or ways to keep up-to-date with technical and scientific advances in industry (Stewart, 2015, p. 20). It is difficult for vocational institutions to maintain a high-level of practically experienced faculty due to the social prejudice faced by vocational education, the insufficient funding for the institutions, and the unfavourable working environment (Li and Lang, 2006).

Skills certification is a key mechanism linking labour market demand with education and training. It is vital to develop a skills certification system with updated and industry-led competency standards that reflect industry demand and is recognised by employers (Liang and Chen, 2014, p. 99). However, evidence shows that existing skills certificates do not carry much weight among employers. According to a non-public enterprise survey in Yunnan, only 24% of professional and technical personnel and 12% of frontline skilled workers have obtained professional or vocational certification. Furthermore, only 20% of the job openings in Yunnan require a skills certification (Liang and Chen, 2014, p. 99). Liu and Su (2016) found that numerous qualifications have appeared for one specific type of work as the whole system has been marketised and many organisations wished to make money out of their qualifications. But this depreciated the value and credibility of all the qualifications on the market. The increased number of qualification types in China, their decreased value, and their outdatedness in relation to frontline production are all detrimental to the Chinese vocational education system (Shi, 2013, p. 20; Stewart, 2015).

The literature reviewed in this section offers an explanation of the tensions in the expansion of the Chinese vocational education system and the severe shortage of skilled labour faced by the Chinese economy. Various researchers have analysed the inferior position of

vocational education in China as well as the negative stereotyping of vocational students. A series of issues and problems faced by Chinese vocational education may contribute to this tension. However, the literature has failed to investigate, from the young people's point of view, why and how they choose the vocational route despite knowing it is not valued. There is also a lack of research into how the negative stereotypes are constructed and perceived by these young people. What is more, the literature lacks explorations of what the learning experience in vocational programmes looks like (i.e. how these above-mentioned issues within the Chinese vocational education sector may impact young lives) and how useful the young people consider their programmes to be in preparing them for work.

2.2.2 The sorting system, performativity, political economy

As discussed in the preceding sections, vocational youth in China have been sorted, or, as Côté would describe it, 'weeded out' by the educational system (Côté, 2014b, p. 84). Similar to the Canadian system analysed by Côté, in China, these weeded out students are also 'cooled-out by their schooling and pressured to blame themselves for not making it' (Côté, 2014b, p. 84). As discussed in the previous section, when 'relegated' to the vocational route, young people are considered 'bad students' (Ling, 2015) who deserve their limited occupational opportunities (Woronov, 2015). This process of allocation or sorting plays an important structural role in the lives of these young people. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the effect of this sorting system as well as the rationale behind it based on previous studies.

There have been many studies on the effects of streaming and banding and the consequent patterns of polarisation among students. In the UK, Hargreaves (1967) investigated the 'academic' and 'deliquescent' groups at Lumley Secondary School and highlighted how streaming of ability within the school influenced teachers' perceptions and interactions with pupils, which led to the emergence of two polarised pupil subcultures. The 'academics' were seen as oriented to the values of the school and the teachers, while the 'deliquescent' group were believed to hold the opposite values, which were negatively orientated (Biggart, 2009, p. 115). In the USA, Oakes (2005) looked into 'the nearly ubiquitous secondary school practice of separating students for instruction by achievement or ability' in 297 classrooms and how this tracking affected the education of high-school students. She found out that the students in the high-track group reported higher levels of educational aspirations than lower-track students, which suggests that students at the bottom of the schooling had adjusted their aspirations accordingly, and yet did not view the school as treating them unjustly (2005, p. 145).

Willis's (1977) UK classic study *Learning to Labour* provides another important reference point. He followed the 'lads' through their final year of schooling in a Midlands secondary school and into their first year of work or unemployment. Willis argues that rather than being failed by the teachers and pushed into jobs they did not want, the 'lads' actively sought to fail themselves. 'One should not underestimate the degree to which "the lads" want to escape from school—the "transition" to work would be better termed the "tumble" out of school,' Willis wrote (1977, p. 100). It was the oppositional cultural resistance to schooling, which included opposition to authority and a dislike of conformist 'ear'oles' (1977), that shaped their outcomes.

Similar to Hargreaves (1967), Ball (1981) studied the effects of streaming pupils on the basis of their perceived ability level. He demonstrated in particular the behavioural differences between two bands and the different school experiences that banded pupils encountered (1981, pp. 22-52). Moreover, he analysed in detail how band stereotypes were generated by the exam system and how they were imposed by teachers (1981, pp. 36-40). The pupils at Ball's school (Beachside) were measured, compared and streamed according to a quantitative description of their educational performance. Within a Foucauldian framework, Ball later theorised his ideas about the performance of students, teachers and schools into the notion of 'performativity' (2000, 2003, 2012).

For Ball, performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation, or a system of 'terror', in Lyotard's words, that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change (Ball, 2000, 2003). The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection (Ball, 2000). They stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement (Ball, 2000). 'An equation between wealth, efficiency, and truth is thus established' (Lyotard, 1984, p. 46). The installation of the 'new culture of competitive performativity' (Ball, 2003) involves the possibility that authentic social relations are replaced by judgemental relations wherein persons are valued for their productivity alone (Ball, 2000, 2003). It is 'a general change in categories of self-understanding and techniques of self-improvement' (Rose, 1992, p. 161). We learn to calculate about ourselves, become more than we were and be better than others—we can be 'outstanding', 'successful', 'above average' (Ball, 2003). Individual teachers, academics and employees are required to take responsibility for making their 'contribution' or 'add value' to themselves and 'improve their productivity' (Ball, 2003), thereby ensuring a 'targeted self' (O'Flynn and Petersen, 2007, p. 469). Increasingly, we are 'governed by numbers' (Ozga, 2008) as 'the technology of statistics creates the capacity to relate to reality as a field of government' (Hunter, 1996, p. 154). The ensemble of performative technologies is an improvised mix of physical, textual and moral elements (Ball, 2000), which 'make it possible to govern in an "advanced liberal" way' (Rose, 1996, p. 58). People are burdened with the responsibility to perform, and if they do not, they are in danger of being seen as irresponsible. Performativity is a moral system that subverts and re-orients us to its ends (Ball, 2012). Operating in the neoliberal market of performances, an individual is made into an enterprise, a self-maximising productive unit that is committed to the 'headlong pursuit of relevance as defined by the market' (Falk, 1999).

As we can see from the above sections, performativity contributes to the production of governable 'docile and capable bodies' (Foucault, 1977, p. 249). Since teaching and learning have been made into calculabilities, it enables the state to sort out and 'pick off' the poor performers (Ball, 2013, p. 167). In investigating the possible reasons behind this governing technique, Bowles and Gintis (2011) critically analysed education systems in the capitalist America, offering an important reference for developing a better understanding of performativity. They argued that educational systems serve as smokescreens for the reproduction of social classes and for the ideological perpetuation of capitalism (Côté, 2014a, p. 535). Schools are structured to serve the interests of capital by sorting out students who are temperamentally suited to becoming workers for various forms of alienated labour in capitalist economies. This sorting process is facilitated by school curricula, which is supportive of capitalist ideologies and designed to create false consciousness. Bowles and Gintis raised their 'legitimation hypothesis', which suggests that a major element in the integrative function of education is the legitimation of pre-existing economic disparities, especially by providing an 'open, objective, and ostensibly meritocratic mechanism' (2011, pp. 102-103). The public are made to believe that economic success depends essentially on the possession of technical and cognitive skills, which can be assessed by the unbiased meritocratic principle (2011, p. 103). It strongly reinforces the view that the hierarchical divisions of labour and job assignment are objective, efficient, just and egalitarian. However, Bowles and Gintis (2011) reviewed various studies demonstrating that the educational meritocracy is 'largely symbolic' with no available evidence to substantiate it. Arguing against "IQism", where economic inequality is rooted in genetically determined difference in IQs, they write that education reproduces inequality by justifying privilege and attributing poverty to personal failure.

Bowles and Gintis (2011) also point out that education systems help to integrate youth into the economic system through a structural 'correspondence principle'; the social relationships of education correspond to those of the workplace, with differing levels of schooling reflecting differing occupational destinations:

> The rule orientation of the high school reflects the close supervision of low-level workers; the internalization of norms and freedom from continual supervision in elite colleges reflect the social relationships of upper-level white-collar work. Most state universities and community colleges, which fall in between, conform to the behavioral requisites of low-level technical, service, and supervisory personnel. (2011, p. 12)

To reproduce the social relations of production, the educational system must train people to be properly subordinate and fosters the stratified consciousness on which the fragmentation of subordinate economic classes is based (Bowles and Gintis, 2011, p. 130).

The studies reviewed above are based on the socio-political relations present in the UK and the US, both neoliberal countries. The 'legitimation hypothesis' proposed by Bowles and Gintis (2011) could be a result of the needs of capitalism/neoliberalism. There is a lack of research into this social phenomenon in the Chinese context, where neoliberalism affects various aspects of the society (Harvey, 2005). How do the students in the vocational colleges feel about being at the bottom of the educational hierarchy? Are they outraged at their situation? Is it possible that they think they are getting what they deserve? The answers to these questions are crucial to this study. One of the purposes of this research is to investigate how this form of sorting process is experienced and facilitated in the Chinese context, especially in relation to the neoliberal trend since the Reform Era. How the students feel about what they experience can give us valuable insight into the most personal effects of the sorting system in today's classrooms. The next section will discuss in greater detail the neoliberal trend in China and its impact on Chinese youth.

2.2.3 The economics of youth transition

Young people frequently negotiate their choices on an individual level (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, p. 114), without locating themselves within the trends of their epoch and the life chances of all the individuals of their social layer (Mills, 1951, p. xx). It is important to explore the bigger picture within which vocational youth are situated, especially in the era of Chinese economic reform. This section begins with a discussion of the socio-political relations in the context of the period of neoliberal economic reform during which the young people in this study grew up. It then analyses various theories and studies concerning the relationship between young people's education credentials and their labour market outcomes. Exploring this relationship will inform, to a certain extent, the understanding of the economics of young people's choice-making in terms of their education and work.

Neoliberalism and Chinese society

Since the launching of sweeping economic reforms in 1978, China has transformed 'from a closed backwater to an open centre of capitalist dynamism with a sustained growth rate unparalleled in human history' (Harvey, 2005, p. 1). According to Isabella Weber (2018), the extent to which neoliberalism exists in the Chinese economy has been widely discussed and questioned. Some scholars claim that China has embraced neoliberalism in a way that coincides with what has happened in various Western countries (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Gledhill, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Sharma and Gupta, 2006). Since the economic reforms, the market has been playing an ever more significant role in Chinese society. Reforms in housing (Lee and Zhu, 2006), health care (Lu and Wei, 2010), and education (Mok and Lo, 2007) seem to follow neoliberal principles. However, many argue that the authoritarian control exercised by the ruling Communist Party over economic development and governance contradicts the neoliberal template (Ong, 2007; Nonini, 2008). Embracing neoliberal logic has been seen as a strategy for the Chinese Communist Party to enrich itself and strengthen its authoritarian rule (Nonini, 2008; Ong and Zhang, 2008; Wu, 2010). Analysing the historical account of China's political and economic problems in the late 1970s, Weber argues that neoliberalism was used as a way out of the crisis, yet the country has not fully embraced the neoliberal path, and it has remained a mixed economy with a consciously and actively visible hand of the state to shape the economic development (Weber, 2018, p. 229).

I do not argue that China is fully neoliberal. Isabella Weber (2018) argues that the basic principles of the Chinese system in the Reform Era are not in accordance with neoliberal anti-collectivism (p. 229). As Ong and Zhang (2008) note, the neoliberal principles of private

accumulation and self-interest—expressed in profit making, entrepreneurialism, and self-promotion—are not allowed to touch key areas, which remain firmly under state control (2008, p. 1). However, in spite of the above-mentioned differences among the scholars about whether or not China has become neoliberal, many of them agree that China has become one of the most unequal societies while the economy has grown rapidly since the Reform Era (Hart-Landsberg and Burkett, 2005; Harvey, 2005; So, 2005; Nonini, 2008). With the reconstruction of the country's economic foundation after 1978, a class-divided society quickly emerged in China (Hart-Landsberg and Burkett, 2005; So, 2005). As mentioned in Section 1.5, researchers have observed a redesigning of the official public discourse from the start of the reform, which involves concealing, and even condoning, certain forms of suffering and social inequality (Shue and Wong, 2007). Individual choices must be made within the excessively aggressive culture of 'competition' (Shue and Wong, 2007; Ong and Zhang, 2008).

<u>Parental investment, the exam culture, and meritocracy</u>

As discussed in the previous section, there was indeed a shift from a supportive socialist system, in which young people had access to 'iron rice bowl' jobs (Hoffman, 2000, 2006; Cook, 2002), to a system in which you had to create 'your own rice bowl' (Bray, 2005, p. 179). The economic reform generated new logics of supply and demand as well as market competition (Hoffman, 2006, p. 551). The 'market mechanism' was officially acknowledged at the Fourteenth Party Congress of 1992 (Sigley, 2004, p. 568). Young people are now required to be familiar with the 'new technologies of labour distribution'—job fairs, interviews, and career counselling (Hoffman, 2000, 2006).

Moreover, the young people in this study are the generation born under China's one-child policy, who have been raised with higher aspirations and more parental investment than previous generations (Fong, 2004). Parents have been pushing their children to study hard to get into college-prep secondary schools and academic bachelor's degree programmes, which they believed would be the most likely path to upward mobility (Fong, 2004, 2011; Bai, 2006; Feher, 2009). Chinese parents emphasise the utilitarian value of education and work more than their Western counterparts (France et al., 1991). Therefore, students are expected to experience their childhood and youth as an endless project of school work, and they are promised that their efforts will eventually pay off in terms of higher future returns (Woronov, 2015). According to Kim et al.'s research on urban Chinese youth, the parents 'talked reason' with their children, which consisted of convincing their children of the

importance of studying in order to find good jobs in the future (Kim et al., 2016). However, Kim et al. found that there was a general absence of discussions regarding the types of majors and careers children should pursue, which may have been due to the parents' unfamiliarity with the rapidly changing academic and professional fields that would be available for their children, given they had only experienced the era of the 'iron rice bowl' (2016). Moreover, there was a lack of vocational guidance to inform young people of their career options and help them navigate their transition (Kim et al., 2016).

For the young people in this study, they have experienced heavy parental investment, high aspirations for educational attainment, and increasingly fierce competition for jobs, all of which leads to their prioritising credentialism, i.e. maximising their educational attainment rather than finding a programme or career that fits their personal interests (Kim et al., 2016, p. 288). Some students, with the support of their parents and their secondary schools, even repeat their senior year several times to re-take the CEE in order to enrol on a better course (Wang and Ross, 2010).

Since the start of the reform era, CEE has been the key mechanism of structuring post-secondary education opportunities (Liu, 2013). Jin and Ball considered this mechanism as 'meritocracy in action', because the selection is exclusively based on exam performance, as the outcome of intelligence plus effort (2019, p. 2). Meritocracy advocates the giving of rewards to individuals based on merit or achievement (Walton et al., 2013), and promotes the notion of equality of opportunity (Jin and Ball, 2019). When Fox (1956), and later Young (1958) started writing about the concept of meritocracy in the 1950s, it was intended as a warning—if society were considered as meritocratic, there might be no sympathy for the disadvantaged, who would be assumed to deserve their fate (Littler, 2018). However, the positive perceptions of meritocracy have been enthusiastically embraced in the West as a highly attractive 'progressive' goal to which centre-left parties can commit themselves (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007, p. 4). Many researchers have challenged this concept by arguing that meritocracy creates an illusion of social justice, disguising structural inequalities (Brown and Tannock, 2009; Dench, 2006; Young, 2001; Bell, 1973).

For the Chinese system, the extent to which the Chinese education system is meritocratic is questionable (Liu, 2013). Conducting a survey study involving around 960 first-year college students, Ye Liu found out that CEE, with its association with meritocratic selection, reinforced the privileges of urban residents and advantaged families in the form of merit

outcomes, while at the same time maintaining social inequality among different regions and between the rural and the urban (Liu, 2013; 2016).

Chinese youth are exposed to examination culture that dominates education in China today (Kipnis, 2011, p. 92). Inherited from the imperial period (Yu and Suen, 2005), the system of exam-based meritocracy is viewed as fair and just (Song, 2016), and the social respect shown to those achieving exam success is apparent (Kipnis, 2011, p.143). In Song's (2016) research on students' attitudes towards the fairness of the exams, it was found that the students expressed a sense of 'affective commitment' and regarded the exam system as sacred, fair competition, and a means to success. In his book, Kipnis analyses the reasons behind this examination culture, arguing that the system reflects an impersonal, meritocratic imagination (2011, p. 92) and a way of fighting corruption and nepotism (2011, p. 121). As entrance to educational programmes takes place by examination, credentials are seen as the evidence of meritocratic, impersonal examination success, which is considered to prove the overall quality of a person (Kipnis, 2011, p. 122). Therefore, the desire to obtain exam success and thus educational credentials (human capital accumulation) is an effect of this examination culture (Kipnis, 2011, p. 130).

Problematising human capital theory

As can be seen from the above section, human capital accumulation—planning for an unknown future by investing in education today—is essential for the life course of Chinese youth and their families (Woronov, 2015, pp. 11-12). In order to understand the relationship between education and the labour market, I will discuss and critique human capital theory— the mainstream economic theory used to explain this relationship (Goldthorpe, 2014, p. 269). Developed by Theodor Schultz and Gary Becker in the 1960s (Schultz, 1962; Becker, 1964), the notion has been immensely influential on all sorts of levels (Schuller and Field, 1998). The decision to spend time on education has strong similarities with an enterprise's decision to invest in physical capital, an individual's investment in education to acquire human capital, which will in turn increase their productivity in employment and allow more future earnings (Becker, 1964). From the 1950s to the 1970s, human capital theory helped to shape the thinking of policy makers and to a considerable extent was responsible for the expansion of schooling (Ashton and Lowe, 1991; Côté, 2014b). In China, since the start of the Reform Era, there has been a widespread acceptance of the notion of 'human capital'—i.e. that education is a type of investment and economic development can be accelerated by spending more money on education (Bai, 2006, p. 137). Human capital has been touted in Chinese

official and popular discourses as an important source of national strength in the new century (Hoffman, 2006, p. 553).

Despite the obvious attractions of human capital thinking and the extent of the educational research which builds on it (See Carnoy, 1995), many researchers have a number of difficulties with this 'calculative, instrumental, abstract and generalized conception of learning' (Livingstone, 1998; Schuller and Field, 1998; Ball et al., 2000; Wolf, 2002; Green, 2013; Côté, 2014b). Many have challenged the human capital argument that education generates skills and increases productivity (e.g. Livingstone, 1998; Wolf, 2002). Some claim that the theory fails empirically in its explanatory power, as the increased unemployment and underemployment of graduates in both developed and developing countries demonstrates that educational credentials do not always represent exchangeable skills that can be converted into profit (Livingstone, 1998, p. 167; Côté, 2014b, pp. 86-88). Moreover, some take immediate issue with the argument that education produces the necessary skills to be successful in a contemporary labour market (Berg, 1970; Collins, 1979), as 'the value of any kind of education depends less and less on specific content and more and more on having attained a given level and having acquired the formal credential that allows one to enter the next level' (Collins, 1979, p. 93).

Arguing from the perspective of skills formation, Green (2013, p. 145) holds that because of its methodological individualism, human capital theory fails adequately to recognise that skills and skilled work are socially determined and ignores the wider social context within which much learning takes place as well as the relationships—personal and institutional—which actually constitute the vehicles or channels through which learning takes place. Moreover, the theory presumes that labour markets are sufficiently flexible, thus the large majority of workers could find themselves matched with jobs that utilise the particular skills they possess. This assumption has led human capital theory to 'downplay' and even 'ignore altogether the demand side of the economy', especially in an era of rapidly changing education systems (Green, 2013, pp. 146-147). It also justifies the mass expansions of school systems by governments as part of their labour market policies that focus on the supply side in the belief that schools will supply workers with greater skills than they otherwise would (Côté, 2014b, p. 82). Therefore, the problem of over-education and skills mismatch could be overlooked by policy-makers (Green, 2013, p. 147). Human capital theory also consolidates the primacy of the language of investment and its acceptance as the only language; thus, it is difficult for learning activities which cannot show a visible return to justify themselves (Schuller and Field, 1998, p. 228).

Under the influence of human capital thinking, similar to policy makers throughout OECD countries (Wolf, 2002; Grugulis et al., 2004; Keep and Mayhew, 2004; Keep, 2006), the Chinese Government has adopted the belief that further higher education expansion is essential to economic success, and the arrival of a knowledge-driven economy requires a universal upskilling of the labour market (Ministry of Education, 2010). In 1993, the milestone policy paper *Outline for Educational Reform and Development* in China set education expansion as a goal for the 1990s (Ministry of Education, 2010). Since the reform, participation in post-secondary education has been vastly enlarged, especially in higher education (Stewart, 2016).

However, researchers have questioned the relation between economic growth and education participation (Keep et al., 2002; Elliott, 2004; Keep and Mayhew, 2004). In their paper, Keep and Mayhew (2004, p. 300) argue that the perception that the expansion of higher education will reap economic benefits stems from the way skills policies in England are based on a 'stockpiling approach', which focuses on the labels (the highest qualification) on the box, while ignoring what is actually in the boxes and what use these contents might actually be put to. This stockpiling approach has been evident in China as well, and the significance of one's 'label' has been widely acknowledged by the Government (Zhang, 2008). Far from becoming a highly skilled, knowledge-intensive labour market, many argue that there will continue to be a significant number of less knowledge-intensive, even low-skill, low-pay jobs in our economy and that some of these employment areas are large and growing (Goos and Manning, 2003; Hogarth and Wilson, 2005). Moreover, it is suggested that there will be a downward migration of graduates through the occupational hierarchy, or 'downward cascading effect of credentials' (Pryor and Schaffer, 1999; Côté and Allahar, 2006). The output of higher education will have to move into less knowledge-intensive sectors, with graduates taking jobs that would previously have been occupied by school leavers (Hepworth and Spencer, 2002). As Rodgers and Waters report, the growth in the number of graduates employed in professional occupations has been driven largely by the increase in the supply of graduates, rather than by an increase in demand among employers for that type of skills (Rodgers and Waters, 2001, pp. 3-4). In countries like Canada and the US, the wage advantage of having a degree is largely due to a massive wage decline since the 1980s among those with lower levels of education, rather than due to any real increase in the value of post-secondary education (Côté, 2014b, p. 88).

The surplus of graduates shifts power to employers as it produces a 'buyer's market' of jobs (Côté, 2014b, p. 84). The oversupply of graduate workers means that they are forced to compete with each other for jobs (Côté, 2014b, p. 535). This situation puts a downward pressure on wages. Therefore, it is in the interest of Capital to maintain a buyer's market to maximise profits through high levels of surplus value on labour, especially under neoliberal conditions (Côté, 2014b, p. 84).

According to Keep and Mayhew (2004), the expansion also creates problems for those who do not possess the required degree in terms of both their employment rates and level of remuneration. As mentioned in Section 2.2.1, in China, the comparative advantages of vocational college graduates are not apparent in their occupational domain, and they are easily replaced by academic graduates (Ding, 2004). Vocational graduates are facing increasingly intense competition and reduced opportunities in the labour market.

It is apparent that under the influence of human capital theory, a growing importance has been attached to educational credentials, indicating a strong connection between education, jobs and rewards (Brown, 2003). The next section explores the relevant theories to analyse the role of educational credentials in the allocation of people to jobs.

<u>The relationship between credentials and jobs</u>

In discussions of the relationship between educational credentials and occupational destinations, three theories have dominated: technical-function theories, signalling and queue theories, and social closure theories (Brown and Souto-Otero, 2018, p. 1). Technical-function theories argue that employers are expected to make recruitment decisions increasingly based on candidates' credential performance in formal education which certifies their knowledge, skills and competences (Young, 1958). Signalling theory (Arrow, 1973; Spence, 1973) and the related idea of labour queue (Thurow, 1975) provide a different understanding of the role of the credential. Credentials are seen as signals for future productivity and learning potential, and the new entrants are ranked in a labour queue competing for a particular job based on the likely value of one's credential signals (Thurow, 1975). Based on Max Weber's ideas (1978), social closure theories consider the role of credentials as the achievement of particular 'status cultures' (Collins, 1971) and view these credentials as a means for inclusion in and exclusion from a specific occupation.

A range of studies have either challenged or complemented these theories. Growing evidence of credential inflation and over-qualification has challenged the technical-function theories as employers may include additional requirements when there is an over-supply of qualified candidates (Brown and Souto-Otero, 2018). For the signalling and queue theories, many researchers (Breen et al., 1995; Brauns et al., 1999; Di Stasio, 2014; Di Stasio and van de Werfhorst, 2016) have found support (to certain degrees) in various labour markets. Individual potential or trainability as signalled by the level of educational achievement creates a hierarchy of academic worth (Di Stasio, 2014, p. 796). Credentials, therefore, constitute an important indicator of one's relative position in a labour queue (Brauns et al., 1999; Heijke and Koeslag, 1999). Moreover, research by Berg (1970) and Collins (1971), as well as Bourdieu's concept of cultural production (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), provide further analysis of social closure theories.

Young people gain a view of what the labour market will and will not reward through a variety of formal and informal mechanisms (Johnson and Burden, 2003). Labour markets function in a way in which employers' demands are transmitted back, via incentives and signals, to individuals, who then structure their choices (Ehrenberg and Smith, 2000). The incentives and signals might be increased wages or the likelihood of those with desired skills or qualification types and levels obtaining a job (Keep and Mayhew, 2004). These conditions tend to impel young people into post-secondary learning with the clear aim of achieving the qualification level required for entry into 'skilled' employment (Wolf, 2002; Côté, 2014b). Young people and their families have been adopting more desperate measures to position themselves at the front of the labour queue to get ahead in the competition (Brown, 2003). Philip Brown (2003, p. 142) called this 'the opportunity trap' as few are able to opt out of the competition for a livelihood.

As for the labour market in China, based on the data collected in 2003 and 2008, Hu's (2013) research demonstrated that there was a significant increase in the number of jobs which required post-secondary credentials between 2003 and 2008, as well as a significant decline in the economic returns for a post-secondary credential. Moreover, the market signals that the starting salary or likelihood of landing a job for academic graduates exceeded that of their vocational counterparts have clearly been transmitted back to the individual youngsters (Ding, 2004; Zhang, 2008). For those who are not fortunate enough to achieve the required CEE score for the academic route, the market demand channels them into pursuing vocational learning as a way of ensuring a position in the labour queue and their entry to skilled/semi-skilled employment (Hansen and Woronov, 2013). This economic condition

may illuminate our understanding of the strong commitment to post-secondary education of Chinese young people and their families (mentioned in the preceding section), as well as the societal attitudes of vocational learning as an inferior alternative (mentioned in Section 2.2.1).

A 'credential society'?

Although there are differences between the above three theories, all of them assume that credentials play an important role in determining the distribution of employment opportunities by certifying productive skills, signalling trainability, or demonstrating cultural capital. Many of the above-mentioned studies reinforce this claim. However, based on a unique dataset of over 21 million job adverts in the UK, Brown and Souto-Otero (2018, p. 16) found that the majority of employers place greater emphasis on the employees' 'job readiness', rather than on their educational credentials. Differing from the results of Hu's research in China, their analysis suggests that less than one in five job postings in their sample specified a minimum educational requirement as educational credentials can no longer be seen as the differentiating factor in employer hiring decisions (2018, p. 16). Arguing against the above theories on the close relationship between credentials and jobs, Brown and Souto-Otero suggest a change in our understanding of the 'credential society', as mass certification results in credential inflation, but calls for a fundamental re-evaluation of the role of the credential in the labour market (2018, p. 17).

Skills ecosystems

The above sections critiqued human capital theory and reviewed how education might (or might not) be linked to the world of work via educational credentials. This section sets out to discuss the ideas of a skills ecosystem to provide an understanding of the relationship between education/skills training and employment that is different from the perspectives derived from human capital theory.

Unlike human capital theory, which only focuses on the supply-side of skills (Green, 2013, p. 145), the idea of skills ecosystems offers an analytical approach that seeks 'to understand skills in context, and [is] concerned with the wider array of determinants associated with workforce development and how it is connected with particular trajectories of social and economic development' (Buchanan et al., 2017, p. 444). The notion of skills ecosystems draws thoughtfully on a key idea of ecology to capture the often organic and dynamic

relations associated with skill formation (Buchanan et al., 2017, p. 446). This idea informed the pilot projects conducted in Australia mentioned in Section 2.2.1.

The term 'skills ecosystems' was first coined by David Finegold in 1999, when investigating the dynamics of industrial clusters of employers using and generating high-skilled labour in California (Finegold, 1999). A 'high-skill ecosystem' involves a high degree of interdependence, a supportive host environment, a plentiful supply of talents, and some catalyst to trigger the development of successful high-skill enterprises (Finegold, 1999, p. 66). The idea has greatly shaped the policy debate (Buchanan et al., 2010; OECD, 2012), and provided a new way of thinking about and reforming vocational education and its skills formation (Buchanan et al., 2017, p. 446).

Applying Finegold's notion of skills ecosystems to the Australian context, Buchanan and his colleagues examined the relationship between learning and work and the coordination of the development and deployment of labour (2001, 2009, 2017). They define skills ecosystems as 'clusters of high, intermediate or low-level competencies in a particular region or industry shaped by interlocking networks of firms, markets and institutions' (Buchanan et al. 2001, p. 21). They highlight the complex skills problems within the country, including the mismatches between the skills held, required and used, which is particularly acute for vocational education graduates (Wheelahan et al., 2015, p. 6). A skills ecosystems approach has been utilised to understand coordination failures, to provide a non-linear approach to casual analysis, and to study workforce development arrangements (Buchanan et al., 2017, p. 444). In their research, Buchanan and colleagues found a deep-seated fragmentation in flows of learning and labour (Buchanan et al., 2009). They note that the current vocational education system, which is based on competencies, focuses on the acquisition of narrowly defined skills and performance outcomes, while workplaces, also using competencies to define job requirements, provide an incomplete basis for engaging with the changing nature of work (Buchanan et al., 2009, p. 20). Moreover, the dichotomy of academic/professional learning and vocational learning is an artefact of policy and institutional design, which is likely to reproduce patterns of inequality (2009, pp. 17-18). The authors emphasise the importance of equally clearly defined, self-directed and flexible pathways, supported by a unified qualifications framework (2009, p. 18). Well-coordinated skills, labour market and socioeconomic policies would create more effective pathways for students and workers. What is more, they would link educational and occupational progression, and progress towards the vision of lifelong learning. Instead, poorly-coordinated policies would result in persistent skills mismatches and a lack of quality jobs (2009, p. 26).

Various countries have experimented with skills ecosystems reform initiatives (Buchanan et al., 2017, p. 446). In Australia, three major programmes collectively supported around 100 different skills ecosystems initiatives between 2002 and 2011, aiming to address both supply and demand determinants of skills problems and improve business performance and outcomes for individuals (Buchanan et al., 2017, p. 448). Groups of employers were prepared to share the responsibility for becoming collectively self-reliant in meeting their workforce development needs (Buchanan et al., 2017, pp. 449-450). Another example of experimentation with skills ecosystems has taken place in Scotland. As mentioned in Section 2.2.1, Scotland's new skills strategy embraces skills ecosystem thinking by moving away from simply boosting the supply of people with qualifications as a way of solving skills problems (Payne, 2007; Scottish Government, 2007). The Scottish Government has been focusing on skills utilisation and developing individuals and workplaces in order to increase productivity, improve job satisfaction, and stimulate investment and innovation (Scottish Government, 2010, p. 6). New approaches have been implemented, including establishing Skills Development Scotland, a new national skills agency. The Government has been working with business leaders, trade unions, regional colleges/universities, and other stakeholders to foster communication and strategic cohesion (Scottish Government, 2007). Moreover, *The Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce* was established in 2013, which aims to help young people develop the requisite skills to move into sustainable, high-quality jobs (Scottish Government, 2013). It provides guidance on how to better engage employers and other key partners, how to improve Modern Apprenticeships, and how to develop high-quality vocational education in key sectors, as well as recommendations for post-compulsory education reform (Scottish Government, 2014).

This section has explored the literature relating to "the bigger picture", the economics of young people's choice-making. It has analysed the social and economic context of China's Reform Era and the relationship between educational credentials and occupational destinations. However, the literature does not adequately investigate the impact of the neoliberal discourse on the lives of vocational education youth in China, in particular as they try to negotiate their education and career choices. This study aims to address this gap. It also sets out to examine how vocational students perceive the relationship between credentials and jobs and how these perceptions inform their perspectives on their future career possibilities.

2.3 The Individual Dimensions

The present study is concerned with young people's educational and career choice-making within Chinese social and economic structures. The previous section discussed the structural context within which young people must navigate their way. Focusing on the individual dimensions, this section deals with the area of literature on the young people's experiences of vocational education and youth transitions under the impact of social change in late modernity[5]. The literature in this area provides an understanding of some crucial concepts for this study, such as "youth transitions" and "youth agency", and how these concepts are developed and challenged in the field of youth studies. It begins with a review of the literature on young people's experience in vocational education. It then discusses the metaphors of youth transitions and some relevant research in this area. It finally investigates the concepts of youth agency and individualisation in debates.

2.3.1 Experiencing vocational education

The present study builds on a body of literature that seeks to understand students' experiences of vocational education, especially in relation to their aspirations and choice-making process. This section analyses some of the important studies which have greatly informed this research, such as Hodkinson et al. (1996), Woronov (2015), Ling (2015), and Koo (2016).

Hodkinson and his colleagues investigated the lives and experiences of 10 young people in relation to the Training Credits Scheme in the UK (1996). They presented young people's career intentions and their experiences of finding placements, as well as their career progression within and beyond training. Their work demonstrated that some young people were forced to change career path or were uncertain about it due to the precarious nature of the placements and their unsatisfactory training outcomes. Finding or losing a placement was not a matter of choice; rather, it was a result of the complex interactions between parents, young people, employers, training providers and career officers (Hodkinson et al., 1996, p. 51).

Based on the perceptions of young people in the Training Credits Scheme, Hodkinson theorises the way young people make career decisions as 'careership' (Hodkinson and

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[5] The term 'late modernity' is used by writers who do not accept that there has been a transition to a new societal stage of post-modernity, but who do wish to acknowledge that there has been a radical intensification of some of the tendencies of modernity. Late modernity theorists focus on the heightening and extension of a range of institutional features (Scott and Marshall, 2015).

Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2008). The central idea is that career decision-making and progression are bounded by a person's 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson, 2008, p. 4), which means the arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p. 34). Horizons for action are constrained by the pervasive influences of social structure (2008, p. 5). They are also influenced by a person's dispositions, and their ways of viewing and understanding the world (2008, p. 5), i.e. young people and their families' perceptions and interpretations of what is 'out there' or appropriate (Hodkinson et al., 1996, p.150). These two elements are 'inter-related, for perceptions of what might be available and what might be appropriate influence decisions, and opportunities are simultaneously subjective and objective' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p. 34). The authors found that all the decisions made by the participants were based on partial information or hot sources —from people whom they felt they could trust, rather than full information from official sources. Hodkinson emphasises the influence on young people's career decision-making of their position in the field and the resources at their disposal (Hodkinson, 2008, p.7), as well as the impact of the 'culture' or 'habitus' in which they have lived and are living (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p. 33). Hodkinson and Sparkes also observe that decision-making involves 'turning points' and 'routines' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2008). The authors identify different types of turning points and routines in young people's lived experience (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997), and emphasise the nonlinearity of the career development among their samples (Hodkinson, 2008).

Informed by the theory of careership, Ball and his colleagues (2000) investigated the lives of further education college students in south London. Similar to Hodkinson's work, the narratives in Ball et al.'s study also illustrate the instabilities which marked the 'careership' of many young people in the sample (2000, p. 24). They further note that becoming an adult has become bound up with short-term choices and discontinuities (p. 59).

Atkins (2010) explored the aspirations and learning identities of young people in lower-level vocational programmes in the UK. She found that many young people in her study whose aspirations included jobs such as nursing, teaching and technical careers in IT had no idea of how to achieve their aspirations (p. 260). Moreover, the young people were sold an image of vocational opportunity which was inconsistent with the reality—they were given no inkling of its exchange value in the workplace (p. 260). The sense of there being a lack of support and guidance among vocational students in the UK was also confirmed by Fuller and Macfadyen's study (2012). The vocational students in the research perceived themselves as academic failures and felt that they were unable to achieve at more traditional and

academic levels of study (Fuller and Macfadyen, 2012, p. 98). Bathmaker (2001) stresses that the relationships with teachers in college appear to be the most significant factor in helping vocational students move from being disaffected learners to starting out on a more successful path to learning.

In South Africa, in contrast to the above-mentioned situation in the UK, Powell (2012) found that the vocational students in her study did not perceive themselves as 'the boy or girl whose abilities justify a vocational bias', nor did they regard vocational colleges as 'mother's last hope'. Instead, the students talked about the empowerment role played by the college in enabling respect, self-confidence and personal pride. They also reported their experience at the college as culminating in a new sense of who they could be and provided the impetus for them to dream new futures (Powell, 2012, p. 650).

The lived experiences of students on vocational routes in China have been investigated by various researchers (Ling, 2015; Woronov, 2015; Koo, 2016; Yi et al., 2018). Woronov explored in ethnographic detail student perspectives in two vocational schools in Nanjing. She found the various creative ways the students managed their time and energy in school every day, including sleeping through class, as a reasonable response to the ways the curriculum and teaching were structured. She notes that given the lack of training in any real vocational skills, and the dearth of actual curricular content or exams that matter, the vocational students have no reason to wake up for their classes (2015, pp. 89-90). Woronov also demonstrated that the students were having a hard time narrativising their goals or desires (2015, p. 111). When looking for jobs, the students seemed to be less prepared or informed, and they experienced short-term horizontal 'job jumps', with relatively low pay and little chance of advancement (2015, p. 134).

Also using an ethnographic approach, Ling focused on the experiences and subjectivities of migrant youth in Shanghai who have been in vocational schools. Similar to Woronov's observation of vocational students' sleeping through class, Ling also found a classroom culture of 'passing time' which disengages migrant students from schoolwork (2015, p. 112). She notes that the youths identified the vocational route as an inferior option for 'low-quality' students (2015, p. 123). Moreover, unlike their parents, most of whom were either manufacturing workers or low-skilled service-sector workers, this second-generation of migrant youth shared their urban peers' aspiration for less labour-intensive, white-collar professional jobs (2015, p. 115). However, when choosing their subject of study, they had limited access to information, social networks and institutional support (2015, p. 118).

In Koo's (2016) research, she investigated the vocational students' educational demands and the means by which they made their decisions to go to vocational school in Chongqing. Although they faced different difficulties and considerations, their major motivation for post-compulsory education was very consistent: obtain higher credentials to secure a better life in the future (2016, p. 51). The vocational students expressed optimism about their future development as they believed the investment in higher credentials would lead them to better employment (2016, p. 54). However, their internship experience left them very pessimistic as many of them spent months working as cheap factory labour. They were concerned about the high chance that they would continue in stressful and tiring labouring work as their future employment (2016, p. 55). Facing the discrepancy between their dreams and the harsh reality of their factory lives, some declared that they had no more motivation to study after 'discovering that they were trapped by the schools' (2016, p. 55).

The above section illustrated the relevant literature on the young people's experience of vocational education. The following sections explore the concepts of youth transitions and youth agency, and how the perceptions of the choice-making process among young people are examined in the field of youth studies.

2.3.2 Youth transitions and social change

<u>The metaphors of youth transitions</u>

The various metaphors of youth transitions are worth exploring here as they provide insights into the changing perceptions of how young people make their choices.

The metaphor of 'pathways' is very apparent in education and training discourse (Finn, 1991). It conveys an image of different 'roads' to be chosen when leaving one position and 'arriving' in another (Finn, 1991). It is an idea of linear transition, within which adulthood is usually defined by markers such as leaving schools, leaving home, getting a job and living independently. However, in late modernity, many of these markers have become impermanent, reversible and fragmented, so that there is no simple and clear "arrival" at adulthood. A group of European researchers characterise this trend using a metaphor of a yo-yo to symbolise 'the ups and downs of fragile and reversible transition' (Walther, 2009, p. 123). This analogy fits well because ever more young people are finding it difficult to associate themselves exclusively with youth or adulthood. Nevertheless, youth and education policies continue to be structured in linear, discrete, hierarchical packages.

Official pathways as designed by policy may be largely symbolic and bear little relation to the actual roads travelled by many young people (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). These policies imply that young people should read the map better and choose a useful pathway, for those who get lost on the way to adulthood only have themselves to blame (Wyn and White, 1997). This understanding contributes to a sense of personal responsibility for one's life experiences, including post-compulsory education and training. As a result, young people are 'likely to blame themselves for any lack of success' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Ball et al., 2000; Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). Thus, the ways in which education and the labour market marginalise some young people become obscured.

Moreover, within the structure-agency perspectives, the metaphor of 'trajectory' is used to imply that labour market destinations are largely determined by social forces and that transitions are largely outside the control of individual social actors (Evans and Furlong, 1997). Analysing from a Bourdieusian standpoint, transitional outcomes are explained more in terms of structural factors, such as social class, race, gender, educational attainment and labour market conditions, rather than by reference to individual characteristics or aspirations. However, in the 'risk society' portrayed by Beck (1992), individuals are required to be self-navigators, 'negotiating their way through a sea of manufactured uncertainty' (Evans and Furlong, 1997). Thus, the metaphor of 'navigation' emerges (Evans and Furlong, 1997). Young people need to learn to live with 'a calculative attitude' to the open possibilities of action (Giddens, 1991).

Young people, social change and the 'epistemological fallacy'

As mentioned above, young people are increasingly required to be self-navigators and assume personal responsibility. Andy Furlong and his colleagues investigated how the 'individualised' risks impact young lives (1997).

In *Young People and Social Change*, drawing on empirical data relating to different aspects of young people's experiences, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) suggest that life in late modernity revolves around an 'epistemological fallacy':

> Although social structures, such as class, continue to shape life chances, these structures tend to become increasingly obscure as collectivist traditions weaken and individualist values intensify. (p. 2)

Thus, risks have become 'individualised' and people increasingly regard failure as individual shortcomings, rather than as the outcome of processes which are beyond personal control (1997). For example, challenges faced by students who are less advantaged in their education

experiences could be considered a reflection of their lack of potential, rather than a consequence of an ill-structured education system. Unemployment among young people may be seen as a result of a lack of skills or qualifications, rather than as a consequence of a world economic recession. In an individualised society, people may 'not be as aware of the existence of constraints as they are of their attempts at personal intervention' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, p. 7). This false perception, or 'subjective epistemological fallacy' (Farthing, 2016), where, for young people, agency becomes the central narrative of their lives, despite acute external limitations, masks the impact of structure on their lives. Young people are 'blind to the existence of powerful chains of interdependency' that link them to social forces (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, p. 114).

Furlong and Cartmel use the metaphor of railway journeys to describe the old model of young people's trajectories. They board trains, follow different tracks determined by factors like social class, gender and education, and there are few chances to change direction. However, the experiences of youth today are described in terms of car driving. The drivers are constantly facing a series of decisions relating to routes to different destinations (1997, p. 6). The experience of driving one's own car, rather than travelling as a passenger on public transport, leads to the impression that individual skills and decisions are crucial to the determination of outcomes. Many drivers focus on holding the steering wheel of the car, but fail to realise that the type of car they have been assigned is the indicator of the outcome. Young people today embark upon a journey with a wide variety of routes and uncertainties, while old social divisions remain intact. The constant source of frustration and stress for today's youth is 'the maintenance of traditional opportunity structures combined with subjective "disembedding"' (1997, p. 7).

In *Young People in the Labour Market*, Furlong and his colleagues further investigated the working lives of young people and the ways they have changed between the 1980s and the great recession of 2008-9 (Furlong et al., 2018). The authors use two longitudinal datasets to explore unemployment, insecurity and work-poor young adults in harsh economic conditions in the UK (Furlong et al., 2018, p. 9). Their analysis demonstrates that young people have been facing increasingly deteriorating labour conditions over the years, involving less secure jobs and more temporary contracts, part-time working, and work in occupations that provide little in the way of intrinsic fulfilment (Furlong et al., 2018, p. 98). Their research is greatly informed by the work of Elias, especially the concept of 'civilising offences' (Elias, 1994). Civilising offences are 'deliberate and premediated acts or interventions especially designed to purposely improve or change the behaviours of the

lower orders, the colonised peoples, and so on' (Mennell, 2015, p. 2). When analysing the UK Government's attitudes toward youth unemployment, Furlong et al. observe a 'punitive turn' in policy—since the early 1980s, unemployed young people have been sanctioned for their failure to secure employment with the threat of benefits being withdrawn and training schemes becoming compulsory (Furlong et al., 2018, p. 103). The treatment of young people in policy is directly linked to the neoliberal agenda, which requires the establishment of civilising offences by the state against young people.

Furlong and Cartmel's idea of 'epistemological fallacy' (1997) shares some similarities with the Marxist notion of 'false consciousness' (1893), which will be explored in detail in Section 2.3.3. Both ideas focus on the false perception of intensified individualist values and the obscuring of the 'chains of human interdependence' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, p. 2). The concept of 'civilising offence' used in *Young People in the Labour Market* bears some resemblances to Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and Gramsci's idea of hegemonic power, which will be discussed in Sections 2.4.2 and 2.4.3.

The above section has reviewed the metaphors of youth transitions and some of the important research in the field. The following section discusses the debates around the role of agency and individualisation in youth transitions.

2.3.3 Agency and individualisation in debates

As mentioned in Section 1.6, the concept of agency has been hotly contested and carries different meanings (Côté, 2014b). It has also been frequently associated with individualisation (Woodman and Wyn, 2014). Individualisation is one of the most discussed, (mis)interpreted and criticised concepts in youth studies (Woodman and Wyn, 2014, p. 42). It is posited that identity is transformed from a 'given' into a 'task' and that individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for this task (Bauman, 2000, p. 31). (A detailed analysis of the thesis is provided in Section 2.4.1.) Woodman and Wyn summarise the recent debates concerning the individualisation thesis in two parts. Firstly, the thesis correctly identifies some significant changes that have occurred in the Global North, particularly a greater 'messiness' or non-linearity in the institutionalised pattern of young lives. Secondly, failing to recognise the far more significant unchanging nature of inequality, it exaggerates the extent of change and the capacities of individual agency (2014, p. 37). The role of agency is fundamental to debates regarding the relationship between individualisation and youth

inequalities. In turn, the dilemmas and contradictions emerging from these debates provide opportunities to rethink the conceptualisation of agency in youth studies.

Woodman describes a 'theoretical orthodoxy' (Farrugia, 2013, p. 681) in youth sociology which pitted Beck's work against the allegedly more structurally-oriented work of Bourdieu. Individualisation has been interpreted by many youth researchers as a claim that structural constraints have been de-emphasised or denied as an influence on life chances, and that individual choices play a larger role in shaping outcomes. In response to what they perceive as the celebration of agency, authors such as Lehmann (2004) and Brannen and Nilsen (2005) present empirical evidence that young people's biographies and identities still vary according to the continued importance of social structures like class and gender. Beck's individualisation also gives rise to the concept of 'choice biography', which was first pointed out by Manuela du Bois-Reymond (1995). The 'choice biography' is contrasted with the 'normal biography', which represents the relatively predictable and linear life course. In the contemporary Global North, 'choice biographies' emerge in the assumed weakening of institutional structures and appear more open to conscious decision making (Woodman, 2009). Steven Roberts argues that individualisation is vastly overemphasising the agency and change that is freeing young people from social constraints (Roberts, 2010, p. 137). For te Riele, 'Beck's concept of the choice biography can be hazardous' for it ignores the constraints on the choices available to young people and emphasises choices and rewards, rather than risks and penalties (2004, p. 246). McLeod and Yates (2006) believe that choice biographies are 'replacing proscribed roles and futures' (p. 84), and they draw on feminist critiques to suggest that Beck's claims of detraditionalisaton and reflexivity are overstated. Substantial evidence has been provided to show that class, gender and race continue to shape young lives.

However, Woodman argues that the concept of choice biography is a product of misreading Beck's work. It tends to function as a 'foil in a constant reinvention of a middle ground between structure and agency', showing that the old divisions do indeed matter (Woodman, 2009, p. 253). The criticism that Beck over-emphasises choice neglects his statements that the individualisation he is proposing cannot be considered in terms of choice. Beck argues that the '"do-it-yourself biography" does not necessarily happen by choice, neither does it necessarily succeed' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996, p. 25). The 'do-it-yourself biography' is always a 'risk biography', which is in 'a state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment' (1996, p. 25). Far from denying social structure and overstating freedom of choice, Woodman and Wyn note that Beck theorises the institutional change that

is translated into individual biography with increasing risk and danger. They argue that individualisation is not a theory of agency but of 'changing social institutions', a theory that can be used and tested only 'through doing the difficult work of showing not only *that* but also *how* social position shapes young lives' (Woodman and Wyn, 2014, p. 42). They argue that the individualisation thesis 'provides new insights into the changing relationships between individuals and institutions' as well as 'a new starting point for conceptualising the changing experience of youth' (2014, p. 38). It can be understood as a framework for investigating how social factors shape patterns of inequality in late modernity.

The above debates in youth studies around agency and individualisation present what Coffey and Farrugia (2014) refer to as 'a worrying move away from the nuanced perspectives on agency' and towards 'unproductive dichotomies between "agency" and "structure"' (p. 463). However, recent efforts at resolving the structure and agency disjuncture have frequently taken the form of calls for 'middle-ground' conceptual approaches (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014). These approaches draw on concepts such as 'bounded agency' (Evans, 2002; 2007) or 'structured individualisation' (Roberts, 1995; Rudd and Evans, 1998) as ways of overcoming this dilemma. This perspective aims to address the issue of 'social determinism versus individualisation and reflexivity in social biography' (Evans, 2007, p. 92), and 'explore the relative contributions of agency (input from young adults themselves on an individual basis) and structure (input from organisations at a national and local level, the effects of labour markets and influences of broad social characteristic such as gender and social class) in the research participants' life and work transitions' (Behrens and Evans, 2002, p. 18). However, this middle-ground approach has also been subjected to criticism within the field. In their paper, Coffey and Farrugia (2014) point out the inconsistencies and contradictions of Evans's conceptualisation of agency. In Evans's studies, agency is initially described as a subjective feeling or belief that young people possess; yet it could also be identified by those behaviours which go against current social patterns (Evans, 2002). Coffey and Farrugia argue that this approach not only fails to explain young people's agency or the dimensions of structures that 'bound' this agency, but it also makes the conception of agency more mysterious and ambiguous (2014, p. 465).

As mentioned in Section 2.2.3, in this study, the choice-making process of vocational youth will be analysed within the context of China's neoliberal economic reform. There is strong evidence that in neoliberal countries across the world, the assumption that young people should take full responsibility for themselves and their own future has become normalised (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Ball et al., 2000). Individualised responsibility is an important

element in the neoliberal ideology that is the dominant narrative in capitalist economies (Harvey, 2005, p. 76), where everyone is expected to be an 'entrepreneurial self', living by 'the promise of success and the threat of failure'—just like a business, in fact (Bröckling, 2015, p. xiv). The concept of agency is interestingly close to that of the 'responsibilisation of the self' (Rose, 1992). This study intends to challenge the usefulness of the conceptualisation of agency, especially the middle ground position, which has been hotly contested in youth studies (presented above and in Section 1.3), by analysing the lives of Chinese vocational youth and their capacity to make choices and take responsibility under the influence of a neoliberal ideology. In order to better understand what is going on with this group of students, rather than taking the "traditional" route of investigation, which potentially contributes to the 'worrying' and 'unproductive' debates mentioned above (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014), this study constructed a theoretical alternative in an attempt to make sense of the young people's lived experiences and perspectives. The next section will discuss this framework in detail.

2.4 Theorising the connection—Theoretical framework

As discussed previously in the Introduction, a theoretical framework is constructed for this study to inform the discussion, as well as to access the usefulness of social theory for explaining the impact of the social/political structure on the individual experience of young people in vocational colleges (Research Question 5). This section sets out to explain in detail each of the theoretical perspectives selected for this thesis and their relevance to the context of Chinese society in the Reform Era. Then, it explains the construction of the framework and the interplay between the three selected theoretical lenses.

From a pragmatic view, Halverson notes that theory has descriptive and rhetorical power, which 'helps us make sense of and describe the world' and 'talk about the world by naming important aspects of the conceptual structure and how it maps to the real world' (Halverson, 2002, p. 245). Moreover, the inferential power of theory could help us make inferences, suggest directions and provide guidance. Theory could also be useful when helping us apply our findings to the real world (Halverson, 2002, p. 245). In this study, social theories will be used for their descriptive and rhetorical power, as they provide possible lenses through which to view the research findings.

When searching for theoretical support for this study, three theoretical strains—the individualisation thesis, Foucauldian perspective and Marxian political economy—were identified as potentially helpful and relevant. Each with their own unique theoretical attributes, they could be utilised to make sense of the findings and inform the understanding of the relationship of personal choice-making and social economic structures (Research Question 5). These three theoretical perspectives were identified as relevant to young people's vocational experiences within the context of the neoliberal economic transformation in China since the end of the 1970s. They will be welded together to produce the theoretical framework for this study.

In addition to the above selected theoretical perspectives, other theories could also be relevant to my research. For example, one of the most widely used theories in youth studies is Bourdieu's notion of habitus and field (Côté, 2014b, 2016), which appears to have explanatory potential in understanding young people's decision-making processes in various contexts (Côté, 2016). However, the Bourdieusian framework does not explain the macro-level causes of or solutions to young people's situations (Côté, 2014a, 2016). The framework

is sprayed throughout academic texts like 'intellectual hair spray', 'bestowing gravitas without doing any theoretical work' (Reay, 2004, p. 432). Therefore, instead of following this popular theoretical perspective, this study aims to explore alternative theoretical lenses through which to analyse the experiences of vocational youth in China.

The capability approach (Sen, 2009) might also be relevant to this study, as it emphasises the quality of life and well-being of individuals. The capability approach highlights the importance of human freedom by differentiating between what people *actually* do (functionings) and what they *can* do (capabilities) (Powell, 2012). Freedom, in the capability approach, as 'acting freely' and 'being able to choose are …directly conducive to well-being' (Sen, 1992, p. 50), is intrinsically important to individual fulfilment (Powell, 2012). However, the capability approach seems to be a restatement of 'the liberal ideal', which 'assumes that people are constituted as formally free and equal and that participation in the public sphere is open upon the same terms to everybody' (Dean, 2009, p. 8). It does not sufficiently address the systemic impediments to human freedom that are associated with the capitalist mode of production (Bull, 2007). Therefore, the capability approach was not selected for this study. The following sections will present the rationale for choosing each theoretical strain.

2.4.1 The Individualisation Thesis

According to Furlong and Cartmel (1997), in the space of one generation there have been some radical changes to the typical experiences of young people, whereby they now see their decision-making as individual 'choice' rather than the product of structured constraints. In the late modern period, individuals are constantly involved in projects of self-construction. Individualisation has emerged as a central theoretical construct to characterise recent transformations within society and the life course (Mills, 2007, p. 61). The individualisation thesis posits that identity is transformed from a 'given' into a 'task' and that individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for this task (Bauman, 2000, p. 31). The thesis has many proponents, each with their own interpretations. Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman can be identified as the main individualisation theorists (Dawson, 2012, p. 306).

Beck

Arguably Ulrich Beck has been the most systematic and rational in outlining a theory of individualisation (Dawson, 2012, p. 305). In his book *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Beck argues that in the last half of the 20th century and at the start of the new

millennium, we are witnessing a 'break within modernity, which is freeing itself from the contours of the classical industrial society and forging a new form—the industrial "risk society"' (1992, p. 9). According to Beck, previous predictabilities and certainties of the first scientific industrial era are broken and people are constantly confronted with risks and concerned about the elimination of the risks.

Within the context of the risk society, Beck presents his model of individualisation. According to this model, people were removed from 'historically prescribed social forms and commitments in the sense of traditional contexts of dominance and support.' The initial disembeddedment makes individuals simultaneously independent to make their own choices and also responsible for their own survival. This is most apparent in what Beck describes as a 'life of one's own' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), followed by 'the loss of traditional security with respect to practical knowledge, faith and guiding norms' (1992, p. 128). A new type of social commitment was becoming re-embedded: the controlling and reintegrating of individuals (1992).

For this 're-embedding', new 'mode of reintegration and control', Beck proposes three theses: the first is that the individuals, regardless of status, class or family, become 'the agents of their livelihood mediated by the market, as well as of their biographical planning and organization.' Governments or other bureaucratic structures presume the individual is the basis, rather than a collective large unit, and they require the individual to take responsibility for his or her self-determination. His second thesis is that despite the variety of biographical situations, individualisation brings about a 'standardisation', which is the result of being dependent on the labour market. The individual must modify his or her biography according to the requirements of market forces. His third thesis is that there are no longer merely private situations, but always institutional ones. The apparent outside of the institutions becomes the inside of the individual biography. Placing the responsibility and the decision-making on the individual's shoulders makes 'do it yourself biography' possible; however, it also creates the illusion of structure being dismantled, when in reality it is still present, only transformed and obscured. Structural failures are hidden and transformed into personal failures. Living your own life means taking responsibility for your misfortunes and unanticipated events (1992, p. 130). In Bauman's terms, taking responsibility for one's choices is the process of 'subsidisation' (Bauman, 2006, p. 4), meaning the previously collective decisions are now decided by individual considerations and choices. This privatisation of responsibility, which appears to be freedom, encourages individuals to find biographical solutions in conditions of ambivalence and uncertainty

without giving them the power and guidance to do so (Bauman, 2007c).

Beck constantly reminds his readers of the contradictions in the processes of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). He argues that:

> Coupled with this interest in "the individual solution", there is however considerable pressure to conform and behave in a standardised way; the means which encourage individualism also induce sameness…the situations which arise are contradictory because double-faced individual decisions are heavily dependent on outside influences. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 40)

The process of individualisation offers people freedom of choice and cuts them loose from traditional forms, while also subjecting them to the control of institutions upon which they are increasingly dependent. The process dismantles structures only to replace them with other, less conspicuous ones. The individual biography becomes reflexive, but it also means that people should be responsible for the consequences of their reflexivity. The next section discusses the ideas of another individualisation theorist, Zygmunt Bauman.

Bauman
Bauman's understanding of individualisation differs significantly from Beck's, particularly in respect of his focus on late modern processes as stratification, as distinct from Beck's integration (Dawson, 2010, p. 13). For Beck, there is little suggestion that some individuals are more reflexive or that some are more individualised. However, by linking individualisation to consumerism, Bauman argues that individualisation is an uneven 'redistribution of freedoms' and 'the volume of freedom depends solely on the ability to pay'. For Bauman, there is stratification within individualisation:

> Being an individual de jure (by decree of law or by the salt of personal guilt being rubbed into the wound left by socially produced impotence) by no means guarantees individuality de facto, and many lacked the resources to deploy the rights implied by the first in the struggle for the second. (Bauman, 2007c, p. 58)

Bauman sees a polarisation within this irreversible trend of individualisation. The ability to partake in this trend is greatly limited to those who have resources. Bauman refers to monetary resources, but they can also include the ability to have one's choice identified as 'legitimate' (Bauman, 2005). Those who fail to have their choices verified, or to act up their choices, are 'faulty consumers' (Bauman, 2007b). For Bauman, the process of

individualisation is a process of uneven 'redistribution of freedoms' (Bauman, 2000, p. 218). There is no universally available opportunity to be 'reflexive' or 'agentic' as a way of responding to the increased personal responsibility (Bauman, 2000). As Bauman writes, 'There is a growing gap between individuality as fate and individuality as a practical capacity for self-assertion; and bridging that gap is, more crucially, not part of that capacity' (2001, p. 47).

Compared to Beck, Bauman's focus falls more prominently on embedded, rather than on disembedded, individualisation (Dawson, 2010). While agreeing with Beck that there is increased empowerment of individuals above and beyond previous forms of social constraint, Bauman sees individualisation as a privatisation of responsibility, disguised as freedom (Bauman, 1992), which often puts the individual in a position of uncertainty (Bauman 2007c) or ambivalence (Bauman, 1991). The individuals, who are now expected to be 'free choosers' are responsible for 'resolving the quandaries generated by vexingly volatile and constantly changing circumstances' (Bauman, 2007c, p. 3). As Beck puts it, 'How one lives becomes a biographical solution to systemic contradictions' (cite in Bauman, 2007c). The fear of inadequacy and a sense of impotency are the results of this affiliation.

Bauman notes the polarisation of freedom and uneven distribution of resources and capacities. For large sections of the population, polarisation means growing impotence and insecurity that 'prevent in practice what the new individualism hails in theory and promises, but fails, to deliver: the genuine and radical freedom of self-constitution and self-assertion' (Bauman, 2001, p. 96).

Individualisation and Chinese youth

The individualisation thesis describes a set of complex phenomena present in Western Europe since the late 1970s. However, individualisation is not a trend that is exclusive to Western societies (Beck and Grande, 2010, p. 415). Yan (2010) argues that as a result of globalisation and neoliberalism, the individualisation process in China resembles that of Western Europe[6]. Similar to Bauman's view of individualisation in Europe, in China, 'state power and politics have been the creators, not the creations, of a transformed society' (Davis and Harrell, 1993, p. 5). It is never about pursuing one's choices, but responding to the institutional changes (Yan, 2009, 2010).

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[6] The debate on whether or not China has become neoliberal is mentioned in Section 2.2.3.

In the Reform Era, as Strickland observes, young people in China have experienced constant state-sponsored institutional changes (Strickland, 2012). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the party-state had to guide the college graduates to search for a job in the labour market as they were used to being assigned a job by the state (Hoffman, 2001). By the mid-1990s, Chinese youth had gained a new understanding of society as they ventured into unknown waters with the purpose of fulfilling their material desires; those in disadvantaged positions had to accept personal responsibility for their failure to develop a career (Hanser, 2001). Growing up in this precarious social context is more problematic than ever before.

Why individualisation?

As discussed above, the individualisation thesis provides for this study the required descriptive and rhetorical power in terms of offering a lens through which to view the state-sponsored greater insecurity and increased personal responsibility faced by young people in China, as in other countries. This perspective provides a theoretical basis for the research and illuminates the situation. However, the assertions of the individualisation thesis have been made primarily via theoretical reasoning (Dawson, 2013, p. 25). The fact that neither Beck nor Bauman engaged in either empirical research or a systematic review of the literature has been a major point of critique of the thesis (Atkinson, 2010; Goldthorpe, 2002). Therefore, this study aims to test the value of the theory by applying it in empirical research. This process might make it possible to contribute to the theory by evaluating or refining its explanatory power to link the structural context with individual experiences and perspectives.

Besides its lack of empirical research, the individualisation thesis, especially Beck's version, has been found to have other flaws. It is unclear about the driving forces behind the process of individualisation (Atkinson, 2007, p. 361). The individualisation thesis remains 'too general to be true in every respect', but 'broad enough that something in it is true anyway' (Kohler, 2007, p. 314).

The second part of the theoretical framework to be utilised in this thesis, the Foucauldian perspective, on the other hand, has been considered more empirically robust and is rarely critiqued for being too general or broad. It has been widely used to explain the connection between the structural context and the individual dimensions, as well as for analysing the behaviours of the government and the individual (Ball, 2013). The following section will discuss the Foucauldian perspective.

2.4.2 The Foucauldian perspective

This section discusses the Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and disciplinary power as well as their relevance to Chinese society in the Reform Era. It then presents the rationale for selecting the Foucauldian perspective for this study.

<u>Governmentality and disciplinary power</u>

Between 1970 and 1984, Foucault delivered thirteen annual courses of lectures at the Collège de France in Paris. In these lectures, he defined and explored a fresh domain of research, what he called 'governmental rationality', or in his own neologism, 'governmentality', which links both the terms 'govern' and 'mentality' (Gordon, 1991). Governmentality became a focal theme in Foucault's later philosophy, where he problematised notions of security, population, and government (Gordon, 1991). Foucault proposed a definition of the term 'government' as 'the conduct of conduct'; that is to say, 'a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons': 'government as an activity could concern the relation between self and self, private interpersonal relations involving some form of control or guidance, relations within social institutions and communities and, finally, relations concerned with the exercise of political sovereignty' (Gordon, 1991). Jacques Donzelot (2009) comments that governmentality is a 'concept invented to denote the "conduct of conducts" of men and women, working through their autonomy rather than through coercion even of a subtle kind' (Donzelot, 2009).

In his early work *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault suggests that the operation of a range of social institutions—the prison, the factory, the school—could be understood as 'disciplinary power', 'a form of power-knowledge that observed, monitored, shaped, and controlled the behaviour of individuals within these institutions' (Foucault, 1977). Disciplinary power '"trains" the moving, confused, useless multitudes of bodies and forces them into a multiplicity of individual elements—small, separate cells, organic autonomies, genetic identities and continuities, combinatory segments' (Foucault, 1977, p. 170). Disciplinary power includes 'hierarchical observation', 'normalizing judgement' and their combination— 'the examination' (Foucault, 1977, p. 170). The technique of examination is particularly powerful as 'it is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish', and 'it establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them' (1977, p. 184).

Foucault argues that his aim was not to analyse institutions, theories, or ideology per se. Rather, he analyses a regime of 'practices–with the aim of grasping the conditions which

make these acceptable at a given moment; the hypothesis being that these types of practice are not just governed by institutions, prescribed by ideologies, guided by pragmatic circumstances, but possess up to a point their own specific regularities of logic, strategy, self-evidence, and "reason"' (Foucault, 1991, p. 75). The rationality of government involves both permitting and requiring the practice of freedom of its subjects. 'I believe that the concept of governmentality makes it possible to bring out the freedom of the subject and its relationship with others which constitutes the very stuff [matière] of ethics' (Foucault, 1991, p. 102). Foucault provides us with a unique investigation into *how* power is exercised, *what* constitutes power relations, and how an individual governs his or her own mentality or interiority in this process—linking technologies of power with technology of the self (Foucault, 1988).

The following section explores the relevance of the Foucauldian concepts to Chinese society in the Reform Era. It reviews some of the important studies investigating young lives in the Reform Era through a Foucauldian lens.

Governmentality and Chinese society

Many China scholars have found the concepts of governmentality useful for understanding the transformations taking place in the nature of Chinese state power (Jeffreys, 2009). In the Reform Era, Sigley (2009, p. 10) argues that from a governmentality perspective, the new market economy in China did not signal 'a retreat of the state'; it requires 'a powerful government that simply intervenes in different ways'. Zhang and Ong (2008, p. 3) call this different kind of state intervention 'government at a distance', which means 'an interplay between the power of the state and the powers of the self'.

Lisa Rofel and Lisa Hoffman are two researchers who have investigated young subjects in China's Reform Era. They focussed on two dimensions around which new urban subjects are being produced: 'desire' (Rofel, 2007) and 'choice' (Hoffman, 2010). In her influential book *Desiring China*, Lisa Rofel describes an emerging form of subjectivity in China, which she called the 'desiring subject', meaning an individual 'who operates through sexual, material and affective self interest' (2007, p. 3). She describes a transformation in urban China during the Reform Era, as young people stopped speaking of themselves in relation to their position in the class labelling system and began to express themselves in terms of their desires: for material goods, professional achievement, sexual experiences, and love and romance. In contrast to the class consciousness of the Maoist era, Rofel found that her respondents attached a new importance to having 'wide ranging aspirations, hopes, needs

and passions' (2007, p. 4). Instead, Hoffman's research concerns the transitions and choices of young professionals in urban China and the forms of power and knowledge that influence who they might become. From an examination of the practices of governing in universities, labour market exchanges, family affairs, and public spaces, she analyses how state governing has changed the way it regulates and orders the population. For young people's college-to-work transitions, the state encourages college graduates to view employment as a means to develop themselves individually, as this serves as a more effective form of motivation for economic growth than the pre-Reform job assignment system ever could. Young people are no longer sent to work units or countryside farms, but are instead allowed to make 'their own decisions', within the limits set out by the state and the market, about where to go and what to do (2010, p. 115). The logic of market exchanges in the Reform Era can be seen as 'governing at a distance'—that is in the 'apparent devolution of regulatory powers from "above"—planning and compulsion—to "below"—the decisions of consumers' (Rose, 1996, p. 54). This zone of engagement existing between the state (through universities and the market) and young people is one arena in which the young professional subject has emerged. Students' "own decisions" are made in consideration of complex rules laid out by governing bodies, local personnel bureaus, and the market rationalities of hiring preferences.

Both of these studies are useful to consider as they look at the ways that young urban Chinese are being pressured to conform to new social norms and how they are being formed as new kinds of subjects in the Reform Era. Both authors argue that the Reform Era requires the production of new kinds of individual subjects who can act in their own self-interests and become entrepreneurs of the self (Zhang and Ong, 2008).

Why Foucault?
The Foucauldian perspective provides a conceptual lens to help us understand how individual young subjects are formed in the context of neoliberal economic reforms and how they conform to the 'disciplinary power'. However, the Foucauldian perspective may have a similar weakness to liberal approaches, which provide explanations of the status quo, social order, consensus, social integration, solidarity, need satisfaction, and actuality (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p. 26). The Foucauldian perspective may recognise and describe the nature of oppression and how it is operationalised, but is does so without a critique of the origins of those problems (Côté, 2014a, p. 537). Therefore, this thesis employs the Marxist perspective to provide a means by which to examine the root causes of the problems, what/who caused the problems, and who benefits/suffers from them (Côté, 2014a, p. 537).

2.4.3 The Marxist perspective

This section discusses the Marxist perspective, including Marx's concept of false consciousness, as well as Gramsci's idea of hegemonic power. It also provides a critical review of the redistribution of wealth in China's Reform Era and the rationale for employing this theoretical perspective. As what is understood by "class" differs between sociologists, it is important to acknowledge this difference and clarify for this study the understanding of "class" which is adopted, using a Marxist lens. The Bourdieusian sense of 'social class' focuses on language, customs and habits (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), whereas using a Marxist lens, 'class' is understood in relation to the economic base as structure (Marx and Engels, 1846, p. 92). Therefore, I see young people, including vocational students, who are dependent on the state (and their parents), as members of the same class as their parents, who have to sell their labour in order to pay for food and housing.

<u>False Consciousness and Hegemonic Power</u>

When Engels (1893) used the term 'false consciousness' for the first time, he was reflecting critically on the way in which he and Marx had been primarily concerned with establishing the derivation of ideological notions 'from basic economic facts' and the actions people took as a result of those notions. We see this for example in *The German Ideology,* where he and Marx argue that: 'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force' (Marx and Engels, 1846). 'The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it' (Marx and Engels, 1846, p. 92). But as Engels regretfully explained (1893), he and Marx had focused too much on the content of ideological notions and had 'neglected...the ways and means by which [they] come about'. To his fellow traveller Franz Mehring, Engels wrote disparagingly of the type of 'ideologist' (as distinct from the materialist) and 'so-called thinker' who relies on the reports of other thinkers, past and present, whilst 'the real motives impelling him remain unknown to him', resulting in a state of false consciousness (1893). He thought that there emerged from this an accepted understanding of the way the state operates 'which dazzles most people'. However, Marx and Engels did not further develop the concept of false consciousness (Femia, 1975; Lewy, 1982; Wood, 1988). Some have speculated that Marx underestimated the power of false consciousness and overestimated the ability of oppressed people to recognise and take action against the source of their oppression (Femia, 1975; Jost, 1995), so that later socialist

scholars such as Gramsci (1971), in their aim to explain why the revolution had still not come about, sought to achieve a greater understanding of the concept.

Gramsci, like Marx and Engels argued that the ruling class uses the state 'to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling class' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 258). What those subjected to the state must do, Gramsci says, is engage in 'critical elaboration' so as to be conscious of what one really is 'as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory' (1971).

For Gramsci, false consciousness is not simply an 'internalisation' of ideologies, but also of the life-practices and the culture of social groups (Eyerman, 1981, p. 48). Based on Marx and Engels's work, Gramsci developed his theory of hegemony, which, he explains, is 'an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society, in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all tastes, morality, customs, religions and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotations' (Williams, 1960, p. 587). Hegemonic rule relies on voluntarism and participation, rather than on coercive threat and punishment. It is achieved by securing 'the consent of the governed' (Gramsci, 1971). In his writings, Gramsci portrayed 'consent' as both active and passive (Femia, 1975). On the one hand, he says, it is given spontaneously by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group, as the masses falsely believe the ideology and political leadership is the expression of their beliefs and aspirations. On the other hand, it emerges in 'a condition of moral and political passivity' because the masses lack the 'clear theoretical consciousness' to enable them to act effectively (Gramsci, 1971, p. 333). Manifested as consent given by the masses, false consciousness has made hegemonic rule possible (Eyerman, 1981, p. 47).

The concept of false consciousness helps to identify the false beliefs of subordinates which serve to sustain the dominant ideology as well as their own social oppression (Cunningham, 1987; Eagleton, 1991; Jost, 1995). For a consciousness to be false, it must include certain kinds of false beliefs 'held by people whose own continuing oppression is partly maintained by their holding them', and they are 'widespread and motivating of social practice to be part of a society's political culture' (Cunningham, 1987, p. 255). Jost has shown some specific examples of false consciousness, including the beliefs some members of subordinate groups

may have that they are inferior or deserving of their plight, and demonstrates how they justify systems of inequality and make false attributions of blame (Jost, 1995).

The redistribution of wealth in China's Reform Era

As false consciousness is a result of a group phenomenon instigated by the power structures of hierarchical social dynamics (Thompson, 2015, p. 453), it is important to recognise this economic hierarchy within China's Reform Era.

As mentioned in Section 2.2.3, there is an ongoing debate about whether or not China in the Reform Era is a neoliberal country. Despite the differences between scholars on this question, they generally agree that whilst China's economy has been growing fast, it has become one of the most unequal societies (Hart-Landsberg and Burkett, 2005; Harvey, 2005; So, 2005; Nonini, 2008). The achievement of neoliberalisation—redistributing, rather than generating, wealth and income—is realised by 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2005; Nonini, 2008). A large, easily exploited, and relatively powerless labour force (e.g. migrant workers and laid-off workers from SOEs) has been feeding the needs of the neoliberal economy (Harvey, 2005; Wu, 2010). Functioning as an oligarchic institution, the state may 'privilege some while marginalising others' through the 'regime of governance' (Nonini, 2008, p. 172). Low labour costs and inflowing foreign investment have maintained the competitiveness of China's export-oriented economy (Wu, 2010, p. 626). Managing the workforce is therefore crucial in order to stimulate production and integrate China into the global market economy.

Why Marx?

Rather than explaining the problems as the Foucauldian approach does, the Marxist perspective may help to investigate the root causes and consequences of the ways individual young people behave, especially where policies do not support their interests and leave them open to exploitation by dominant economic interests (Côté, 2014a, p. 528). The Marxist perspective draws attention to the problem of manufactured consent in the creation of false consciousness and provides radical solutions (Côté, 2014a, p. 538). However, the notion of false consciousness has been critiqued as having 'little analytical value other than describing millions of people as unthinking, mindless dupes' (France and Threadgold, 2016, p. 618), and is avoided by mainstream social scientists for being 'too entrenched in Marxist doctrine' (Fox, 1999, p. 12) and for 'its patronizing nature' (Geis, 1998, p. 270). As Côté explains, 'consciousness' does not refer to the person's agentic abilities to think, but rather to people's knowledge of their place in class relations (Côté, 2016, p. 858). It focuses on 'the acceptance of ideologies that disguise what takes place between economic élites and the consequence

of these activities for people's lives' (Côté, 2016, p. 859). It is useful to connect the students' experiences and perspectives with 'existing social relations' (White and Wyn, 1998), and locate them 'beyond youth and young people in and of themselves' (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2016).

Three theoretical strains—the individualisation thesis, the Foucauldian, and the Marxist perspective—have each been discussed in the above sections. The following will analyse the interplay and connection between these three selected theories.

2.4.4 Constructing the theoretical framework

As can be seen from the above discussion, each theoretical perspective has its own strengths and weaknesses when striving to understand the connections between the structural context and individual experiences. Although the individualisation thesis offers a helpful lens to look at the greater insecurity and increased personal responsibility faced by young people, it is not so useful for explaining the driving forces behind the processes of individualisation. The Foucauldian perspective is useful for analysing the behaviours of the government and the individual, yet fails to address the root causes of the problems. Although Engels admitted that he and Marx 'neglected…the ways and means by which [false consciousness came] about' (Engels, 1893), the Marxist perspective could possibly address the deficiencies of other theories on some level by offering radical solutions and the possibility of informed action. Therefore, I have constructed a theoretical framework for this study using the above-mentioned three theoretical perspectives.

This section focuses on explaining in detail how these three theoretical perspectives relate to each other and their relevance to neoliberalism. However, for this theoretical framework, there is no intention to produce a synthesis of the three theories nor achieve a theoretical coherence. The table below summarises how each theoretical component relates to three of the four research questions and the main themes of the study. The theoretical framework is not intended to address Research Question 2, which concerns the actual practices within two colleges—How do young people experience attending vocational college? and What are their perspectives on the vocational programmes as preparation for the world of work? This two-part question will be considered using relevant literature on vocational education and skills formation (see Sections 2.2 and 2.3). It also demonstrates why each theoretical component works for this study. (All three theoretical perspectives are relevant to the primary research question as well as to Research Question 5—In what ways does social

theory help us explain the connection between the economic/social structure and the experiences of young people in vocational colleges?)

Table 2.1—Theoretical framework

Theoretical perspective	Research Question	Main theme	Why the perspective works
The individualisation thesis	RQ1 What are students' experiences of choosing a vocational college and programme? RQ3 What are vocational students' perspectives on their future career possibilities? RQ4 How do vocational students compare themselves with those following academic routes?	Making a "choice" (educational and career choices) Agency and neoliberalism	The individualisation thesis provides the required descriptive and rhetorical power in terms of offering a lens through which to view the greater insecurity and increased personal responsibility faced by Chinese vocational youth.
The Foucauldian perspective	RQ4 How do vocational students compare themselves with those following academic routes?	The stereotypes The exam culture, agency and neoliberalism	The Foucauldian perspective provides a conceptual lens that helps us understand how individual young subjects are formed in the context of neoliberal economic reform and how they conform to the 'disciplinary power' (Foucault, 1977).
The Marxist perspective	RQ1 What are students' experiences of choosing a vocational college and programme? RQ3 What are vocational students' perspectives on their future career possibilities? RQ4 How do vocational students compare themselves with those following academic routes?	Making a "choice" (educational and career choices) The stereotypes Agency and neoliberalism	The Marxist perspective draws attention to the problem of the manufacture of consent in the creation of false consciousness and provides radical solutions. With its unique rhetorical power, it contributes to the conceptualisation of some important aspects (e.g. agency) in the thesis.

These three theoretical perspectives are understood and analysed within the context of the neoliberal economic transformation taking place in China since the end of the 1970s. The following section discusses the concept of neoliberalism, before presenting the details of the framework.

Neoliberalism is perceived as 'a set of principles rules undivided across the globe' and 'the most successful ideology in world history' (Anderson, 2000, p. 17). Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of 'political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). The role of the state is to create and preserve these tasks of privatisation, marketisation and lessening regulation (Harvey, 2005; Dawson, 2013). States must take such actions because, in a global economy, they are forced to compete for capital by developing an attractive market for investment (Strange, 1994). The fundamental mission

of neoliberal states is to 'facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital' (Harvey, 2005, p. 7). For Harvey (2005, p. 19), neoliberalisation is interpreted either as 'a utopian project to realise a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism' or as 'a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites'. It is the ideology of neoliberalism that is of special concern for the theoretical framework of this study.

Figure 2.1 Theoretical Framework
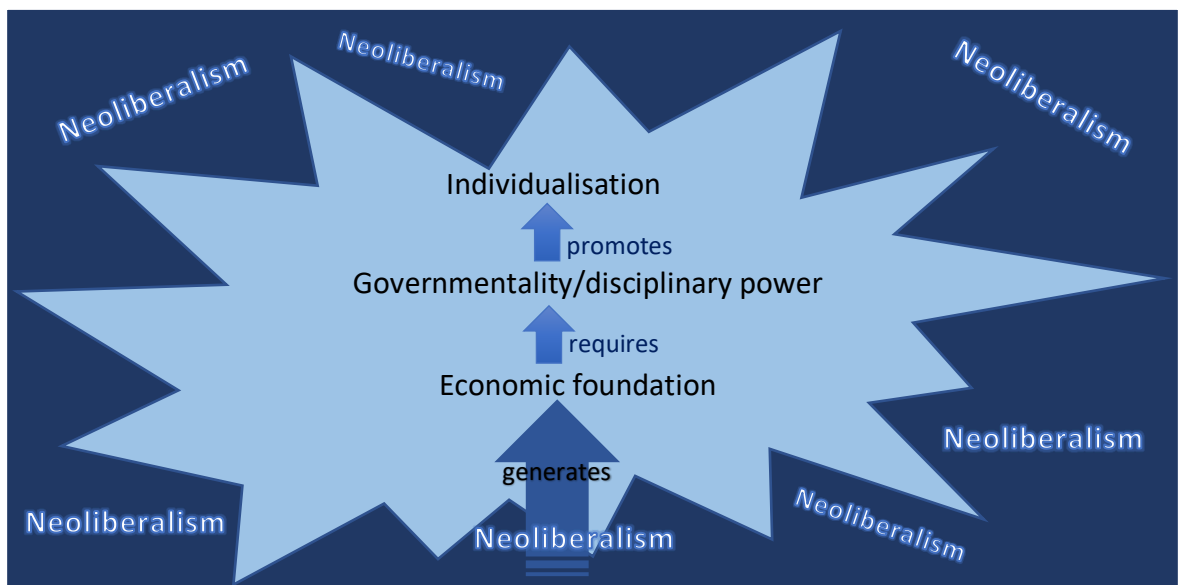
Three different theoretical strains and their interplays are presented in Figure 2.1. As mentioned above, the persistent redistributive effects and increasing social inequality of neoliberalism indicates 'the restoration of class power' (Harvey, 2005, p. 16). It generates the economic structure of society, 'the real foundation', in Marxist terms, 'on which arises superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness' (Marx, 1859). This economic foundation requires certain governing techniques to maintain and secure the class power. Both the economic foundation and the governing techniques have contributed to the process of individualisation within the neoliberal context.

Within a historical-materialist perspective, Marx explained how the subordinate classes take exploitative relations of production for granted through 'commodity fetishism' (Marx, 1887). Based on Marx's work, Gramsci observed the hegemonic power in capitalist society, which manages the population by securing 'the consent of the governed' (Gramsci, 1971). With hegemonic power, neoliberal ideas have permeated society and framed the 'common-sense

language' (Gramsci, 1971). The broadly egalitarian and collectivist attitudes that underpinned the welfare state era are giving way to a more competitive, individualistic market-driven, entrepreneurial, profit-oriented outlook (Hall and O' Shea, 2013).

Although Foucault's work is characterised by some kind of 'genuine struggle' with Marx, (Balibar, 1992, p. 39), connections can be found between these two theoretical strains. When discussing the process of 'the accumulation of men' and 'the accumulation of capital', Foucault argues that 'it would not have been possible to solve the problem of the accumulation of men without the growth of an apparatus of production capable of both sustaining them and using them; conversely, the techniques that made the cumulative multiplicity of men useful accelerated the accumulation of capital' (Foucault, 1977, p. 220). Similar to Gramsci's concept of hegemony in terms of managing the population, Foucault's idea of governmentality, or 'the conduct of conduct', also uncovered the appropriate technique for securing and administering the larger population units or the 'cumulative multiplicity of men' (Gordon, 1991)

The individualisation thesis, with its focus on reflexivity, choice and self-responsibility, is considered to be 'neoliberalism in action' (Lazzarato, 2009). The neoliberal individualisation process is often linked to Foucault's work on governmentality (Dawson, 2012), as it structures 'the possible field of action of others' (Foucault, 1982, p. 221), which helps to create the field of action by constituting individuals whose conduct will contribute towards the reproduction of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism-driven individualisation has produced a 'technique of the self' (Foucault, 1988, p. 45), which permits 'individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state' (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). The process of individualisation, as a way of life in late modern society, is a result of being subject to disciplinary power, and is the formation and control of individuals through various techniques of training and normalisation (Smart, 2010).

As to the relevance of the individualisation thesis to the Marxist political economy perspective, Zygmunt Bauman, one of the individualisation theorists, addresses this connection by focusing on embedded individualisation (Dawson, 2011, 2012). He states that late modern society continues to be a 'class society' (Bauman, 2012, p. 17), and that the inequalities that this produces are a 'collateral causality of profit-driven, uncoordinated and uncontrolled globalisation' (Bauman, 2011). Bauman points out that since 'there is no

alternative' (Bauman, 2007a), without forms of security, and ways of linking the individual to the collective, current forms of inequality will continue apace and become further embedded, and neoliberalism is reproduced through this embedding (Bauman, 1999, 2007a).

The above section explained in detail how the theoretical framework for this thesis was constructed. This theoretical framework will be frequently referred to in the following chapters. The next chapter will focus on how the research is designed and undertaken in order to answer the research questions.

Chapter 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed the literature on "the structural" and "the individual" aspects of the lives of young people in vocational education in China. This chapter sets out the details of the research methods adopted to investigate the research questions. The primary research question is: How are young people in China exercising personal agency in their educational and career choices within the existing social and educational structure? It involves an important interface between "the structural" and "the individual" of young people's experiences. However, it is difficult to attribute sociological or educational meaning to individual feelings and experiences (Rudd, 1996). One possible way of making progress on this issue is to use more than one research method—a pragmatic approach. Thus, a mixed methods research design involving the triangulation of methods and data sources was chosen for this study. Such an approach may bring into focus the impacts of structural forces on the individual experiences and perspectives and may to some extent help to answer the research questions.

The chapter begins by introducing the general methodological approach involved in the study and the research paradigms, especially pragmatism as a philosophical underpinning for this study. This is followed by an explanation of why a mixed methods approach was adopted. The chapter then provides information regarding sample selection and outlines the three stages of data collection. It also presents the data collection procedures in the pilot study, which prompted constant reflection on and readjustment of the instruments employed. After that, there is a description of the ways in which quantitative and qualitative data were analysed and integrated. The chapter concludes by discussing the ethical considerations.

The following general methodological techniques have been utilised for the present study: (A more detailed rationale is presented in Section 3.5.)

(1) Structured Questionnaire—administered to samples of 100 respondents in each of the two colleges, and producing mainly, but not exclusively, quantitative data. The questionnaire provided information, including the students' family backgrounds, their attitudes towards their programmes and colleges, their future plans, and the factors that influence their choices.

(2) Focus Groups—with four group sub-samples drawn from the questionnaire respondents in each of the two colleges, Riverside and Seaside (16 participants from

Riverside and 20 participants from Seaside). Since one of the main purposes of the research is to elicit Chinese vocational youth's views on their colleges and programmes and their future plans, the use of focus groups is seen as one of the primary methodological strategies in the research design.

(3) Narrative interviews—with nine student sub-samples drawn from the focus group participants in each of the two colleges. Using narrative interviews provides 'a sensitive approach' (Bauer, 1996) to gathering the information on the students' lived experiences of choice-making in their pasts and in their current vocational education experiences, as well as their attitudes towards the popular stereotypes. This approach is also a primary methodological strategy for this study.

(4) Additional semi-structured interviews—with four teaching staff. The participants were asked about their experiences of assisting the students and their opinions about the prevalent attitudes towards vocational college and vocational students. They were also asked to comment on the current curriculum.

The following sections contain a discussion on the research paradigm and the rationale for adopting the mixed methods approach. This discussion played a key role in helping to inform the design of this study.

3.2 Research paradigm

Paradigms are 'the worldviews or belief systems that inform and guide investigations of educational phenomena' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). They involve 'the relation between ontology, epistemology and methodology' (Admiraal and Wubbels, 2005, p. 315). Ontology refers to 'what is' (i.e. the nature of existence), while epistemology entails 'what it means to know' (Crotty, 2003, p. 10).

Positivism and interpretivism are considered the two extremes that hold contradictory positions in epistemology and ontology (Henn et al., 2009). 'A positivist approach would follow the methods of the natural sciences and, by way of allegedly value-free, detached observation, seek to identify universal features of humanhood, society and history that offer explanation and hence control and predictability' (Crotty, 2003, p. 67). Positivist research emphasises measurement, comparison, and objectivity (Cohen et al., 2007). Quantitative instruments, such as questionnaires, are favoured by researchers who adopt this position (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In contrast, the key idea of interpretivism is 'to make sense of [the] world, to understand it, to see what meaning is imbued in that situation by the

people who are part of it' (Radnor, 2001). It is usually associated with qualitative instruments, such as interview and observation (Snape and Spencer, 2003).

There are various debates concerning the compatibility of quantitative and qualitative research as each approach draws on different philosophical assumptions (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2012). It is important to acknowledge these debates and illustrate how a pragmatist philosophical worldview and mixed methods approach to research would be fit for this study.

Advocates of quantitative and qualitative research have engaged in ardent disputes for more than a century (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 14). The 'purists' advocate 'the incompatibility thesis' (Howe, 1988), which posits that these two research paradigms are ineluctably rooted in different epistemological assumptions, values, and methods, which are inextricably intertwined and incompatible (Bryman, 2012, p. 629). Quantitative methods belong to one worldview, whereas qualitative methods apply to another, which leads some to the conclusion that mixed methods research is untenable (Creswell, 2012, p. 537).

However, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie argue that mixed methods research sits in 'a new third chair' (2004) that can 'help bridge the schism between quantitative and qualitative research' (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005). Pragmatism is the best paradigm to use for justifying mixed methods research (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Pragmatism is a worldview or philosophy that

> arises out of actions, situation, and consequences rather than antecedent condition (as in postpositivism). There is a concern with application—what works—and solutions to problems. Instead of focusing on methods, researchers emphasize the research problem and use all approaches available to understand it. (Creswell and Creswell, 2017)

Pragmatism allows researchers to be free from the limits imposed by a 'forced choice dichotomy' (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017, p. 44). It 'presents a very practical and applied research philosophy: study what interests and is of value to you, study it in the different ways that you deem appropriate, and use the results in ways that can bring about positive consequences within your value system' (Tashakkori and Teddie, 1998, p. 30). A pragmatist position allows this study to utilise different logics of inquiry, such as induction (discovering patterns), deduction (testing theories and hypotheses), and abduction (uncovering and

relying on the best of a set of explanations for understanding one's results) (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 17).

3.3 Mixed methods approach

3.3.1 Why mixed methods

By following a pragmatist position, this study has adopted a mixed methods approach. A number of researchers argue in favour of a mixed methods approach. For example, in Bryman's (1988) book *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*, he outlines the essential characteristics of the qualitative and quantitative research traditions and suggests that the differences between the two have been exaggerated. It is inaccurate to consider these approaches as 'mutually antagonistic' or as 'mutually exclusive' types of research process (Bryman, 1988, p. 105). Bryman proposes that combining the two traditions could enable 'much more complete accounts of social reality [to] ensue' (1988, p. 125). The validity of the research would be enhanced if 'mutual confirmation' could be provided (p. 131).

Glaser and Strauss, who are mainly concerned with the generation of theory from data collection and coding processes, make clear that both qualitative and quantitative methods and data can be employed in generating theory. They argue that the distinction between qualitative and quantitative data is 'useless' for the generation of theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 9). Different kinds of data, or slices of data, provide different views or vantage points from which to develop and understand theoretical categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 65). From a grounded theory perspective, the integration of qualitative and quantitative research could take on a more 'iterative character' (Bryman, 1992, p. 67), in which both methods are heavily interwoven, and require investigator moves back and forth among methods, as well as between data collection and theory elaboration.

Similarly, Hammersley calls for a 'deconstruction' of the quantitative-qualitative divide. He argues that deconstructing quantitative and qualitative paradigms into their various component parts shows that there is a great deal of variety in social research: 'this diversity cannot be encapsulated within two (or for that matter, three four or more paradigms)' (Hammersley, 1992, p. 160). He also provides an interesting analogy:

> What is involved is not a crossroads where we have to go left or right. A better analogy is a complex maze where we are repeatedly faced with decisions, and where paths wind back on one another (Hammersley, 1992, p. 52)

Hammersley believes that the distinction between the two methods tends to obscure the complexity of the problem and threatens to render our decisions less effective than they might otherwise be.

The complex maze-like nature of social research has also been addressed by Jennifer Mason (2006). She refers to it as the 'multi-dimensionality' of social lives (2006, p. 11). According to Mason, the value of a mixed methods approach is its capacity to explore the multi-dimensional social experience and lived realities (Mason, 2006). Some of the most significant strands of macro-scale theorising in recent times draw on little if any empirical evidence (for example, the individualisation thesis discussed in this study) (Mason, 2006, p. 14). Therefore, mixed method approaches can help us frame questions whose aim is to 'focus on how different dimensions and scales of social existence intersect or relate' and 'how it is that what we might think of as primarily micro or macro domains are shifting and fluid categories are in perpetual interplay' (2006, p. 15).

Drawing on a content analysis of articles deriving from mixed methods research, Bryman (2006) identifies 17 ways in which quantitative and qualitative research are combined. As for the present study, quantitative and qualitative research have been combined with the purpose of 'triangulation' and 'completeness' (Bryman, 2006). The term 'triangulation' was originally borrowed from psychological reports (Campbell and Fiske, 1959) and developed by Denzin (Denzin, 1970). It implies that the results of an investigation employing a method associated with one research strategy are cross-checked against the results obtained by using a method associated with the other research strategy (Bryman, 2012, p. 635). In my study, the results such as the factors influencing students' decision-making processes and their attitudes to the college and the training provided could be cross-checked using these two approaches to increase their validity. However, Bryman warns us of a problem in triangulation: the fact that quantitative and qualitative research have different preoccupations and highly contrasting strengths and weaknesses means that 'the ensuing data may not be as comparable as is sometimes proposed by the advocates of triangulation' (Bryman, 1992, p. 64). It may be questionable whether quantitative and qualitative research are in fact tapping the same things even when they are examining apparently similar issues. 'Completeness' indicates that a more complete answer to a research question or set of research questions can be achieved by including both quantitative and qualitative methods (Bryman, 2012, p. 637). In the present study, there is a need for information, such as biographical information about the social backgrounds of a large number of students, which is not accessible through

qualitative interviewing. Therefore, it requires combining both approaches to achieve a more complete answer.

3.3.2 Mixed methods in a qualitatively driven way

This study has adopted a mixed methods approach in 'a qualitatively driven way' (Mason, 2006), as it offers enormous potential for generating new ways of understanding the complexities and contexts of social experience, and for enhancing our capacities for social explanation and generalisation (2006, p. 10). The approach celebrates the richness and nuance in data and understanding and offers reflexivity and flexibility (2006, p. 22). The qualitatively driven way of conducting mixed methods research is particularly essential for a study such as this, which aims to understand and communicate the experiences of young people in vocational colleges, with a 'distinctive "real life" immediacy and resonance' (2006, p. 22). The present mixed methods study also involved a great deal of reflection and reflexivity to explore on what basis the methods being used can provide the knowledge about the social phenomena and the processes being investigated (see below sections on pilot study and research design).

Placing the priority on the qualitative phase, this study first obtained quantitative results from a population, and then used these findings to inform an in-depth qualitative exploration during the second phase. However, this design requires 'the researcher to decide on the participants to sample in the second qualitative phase as well as the questions to ask in this phase that builds on the initial quantitative phase' (Creswell, 2012, p. 543). It is labour-intensive and requires expertise, time and resources to collect both quantitative and qualitative data (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006; Driscoll et al., 2007; Creswell, 2012). Moreover, for this design, there is a potential lack of overt linkages between the structured and unstructured responses (Driscoll et al., 2007, p. 22). This potential threat to the research design will be addressed in Section 3.8 (Linking data).

3.4 Sample selection

The data used to address the research questions in this study is collected from two different vocational colleges in China: Seaside and Riverside.

Riverside is a state-funded vocational college located in Tianjin. It recruits students nationwide and only offers vocational degrees. It is funded by and partnered with a large local state-owned enterprise. The main campus of Riverside College (see Image 3.1) is

located on the outskirts of Tianjin city, which may appear shabby and depressing to students. The main campus is equipped with training facilities, such as workshops and labs, as well as a library and a student centre. Its satellite campus, located in the city centre, only has two teaching buildings and a reading room. One third of Riverside students are currently based at the satellite campus.

Located in Dalian, Seaside is a private and vocationally oriented college with a focus on IT. The aim of researching this college is to explore student experiences in private vocational colleges and compare them with those in state-funded ones. Seaside is jointly funded by the Seaside cooperation and a local real estate company. It is ranked as a "third-tier" college in the Chinese higher education hierarchy, offering both academic degrees and vocational degrees. The tuition fees for this private college are approximately twice as much as those for state-funded colleges. The campus is spacious and modern (see Image 3.2). It is located in the Software Park of Dalian, which is part of a high-tech industrial zone for outsourcing the business of international IT companies. The campus is surrounded by office buildings and a few prestigious research universities, which are ranked as "top tier" in the higher education hierarchy.

Image 3.1 An afternoon class (Business English), Riverside

Image 3.2 A morning lecture, Seaside

In the questionnaire phase of the research, the aim was to include 100 full-time students on vocational programmes from each of the two colleges. A combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. In both of the colleges, convenience sampling was employed initially as participants who are willing and available to be studied can more easily be recruited (Creswell, 2012). I then recruited the rest of the participants through snowball sampling, asking participants to identify others to become members of the sample (Creswell, 2012, p. 146).

For the qualitative phase, purposeful sampling was used in the selection of the participants. I intentionally selected individuals whom I believed could help me learn about or understand the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012, p. 206), and chose 'those whose testimony seems most likely to develop and test emerging analytic ideas' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 138). Based on the information collected in the questionnaire phase, I selected focus group participants according to how 'information rich' (Patton, 1990, p. 169) they were when responding to the questionnaire. Four focus groups were conducted in each college, consisting of 16 students in total at Riverside and 20 students at Seaside. The same sampling principle was used when recruiting narrative interview participants. Nine students were interviewed at each college.

The present research also conducted additional interviews with four teaching staff. The aim of recruiting a small number of staff was to provide a source of information which could verify and supplement the students' perspectives, especially when discussing the prevalent stereotyping against vocational students. The views of college staff were valuable in

developing a fuller picture of the situation, yet they were not the focus of the study. Hence only a small sample of teaching staff was involved.

3.5 Research design

This section illustrates the research methods adopted in each stage of this study, as well as the relevant literature justifying these methods. At the beginning of this chapter, the three stages of the research were briefly outlined. Figure 3.1 presents a more detailed explanation of the research design.

Figure 3.1 Research design
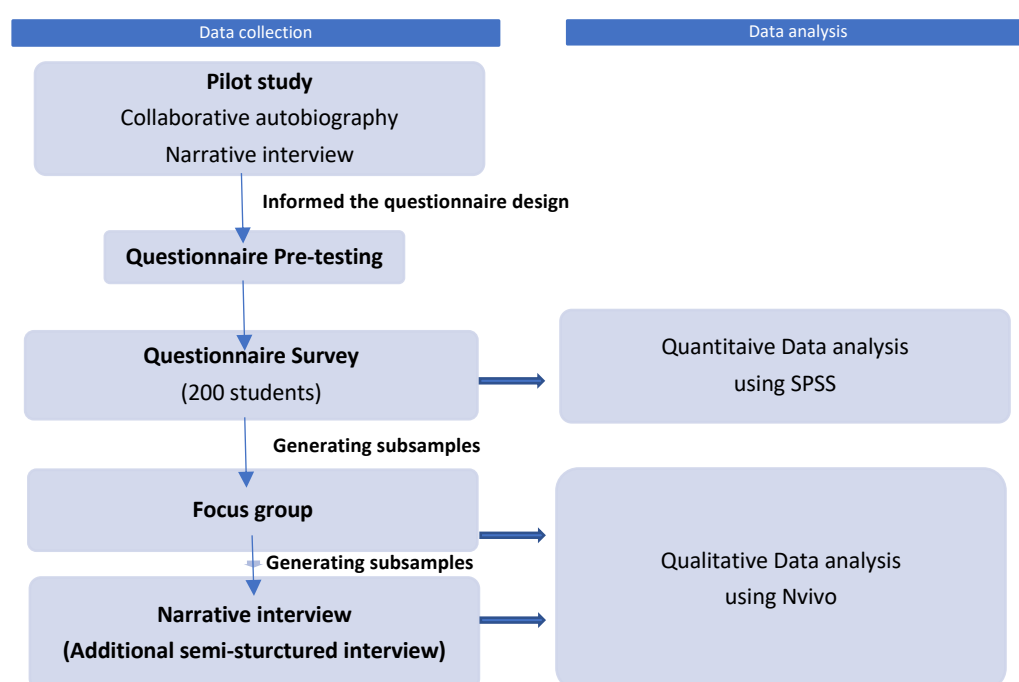
As can be seen in Figure 3.1, after the pilot study, the quantitative research phase was followed by a qualitative phase. This particular sequence can be useful, as 'the initial quantitative research allows a "mapping" of the issue to be addressed and also provides the basis for the selection of comparison groups for in-depth qualitative interviewing' (Bryman, 1988, p. 137). The preliminary quantitative research could provide a context for qualitative work and build up a detailed statistical foundation regarding the students and their experiences, while the qualitative research can be used to 'interpret, illuminate, illustrate and qualify' the statistical findings (Walker, 1985, p. 22).

In the present study, the two strategies constantly complement and reinforce each other throughout the entire research. Although the questionnaire phase was mostly completed before the focus group sessions and interviews, the analysis of both the quantitative and

qualitative data was ongoing throughout the research process. The questionnaire data provide 'contextual information of a quantified variety' and 'indicate the incidence of particular groups in the general population' (Brannen, 1992, p. 28). Additionally, the questionnaire sample constituted a basis upon which the qualitative research sample could be selected. The questionnaire data was frequently referred to in order to check an individual's view in focus group/interview sessions against his or her own response in the questionnaire, as well as to compare the individual's opinion with the views of the college sample as a whole (Section 3.8 *Linking data* will elaborate on how these two sets of data are compared and linked). The participants in the qualitative data collection stage (i.e. focus group and interview sessions) were at times asked to clarify their questionnaire responses. In this way, the quantitative data 'sit side-by-side with' the qualitative data as 'indications of the way in which subjects think and feel' (Bryman, 1988, p. 140).

3.5.1 Stage 1—Structured questionnaire

The questionnaire stage of the research had two aims: firstly, to provide a broad statistical overview of the students themselves and their experiences of vocational colleges and programmes, which could be used in conjunction with the qualitative data collected later in the research process; and, secondly, to generate subgroups and ideas for conducting focus group and narrative interviews. Therefore, the later qualitative phase of the research was informed by the quantitative phase. Before the questionnaire stage of the research, a qualitative pilot study was conducted. The design of the questionnaire was informed by the data gathered in the qualitative pilot study, such as the students' career plans and different aspects of their current experiences. From the qualitative pilot study to the main quantitative and qualitative phases (the two "strands" of the research stage), qualitative and quantitative data were integrated and linked with each other.

Questionnaires are seen as useful instruments to quickly reach a relatively large sample in a flexible and cost-effective way (Bryman, 2012, p. 233). They are often used in survey research to study attitudes, opinions, perceptions and preferences (Borg et al., 1993; Wiserma and Jurs, 2005). Questionnaires provide 'the hard quantified facts' (Kvale, 1996, p. 164). A number of useful comparisons could be made using the statistical findings, such as the students' experiences at the two colleges or the aspirations of respondents wishing to enter two different labour markets. Questionnaires also offer the advantage over interviews of there being an absence of an interviewer (Bryman, 2012, p. 233).

The questionnaire for this study was designed to gather detailed information about young people's attitudes towards their programmes and colleges, their future plans, and the factors that influence their choices. The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) is partly based upon the one used in Rudd's study on further education in England (Rudd, 1996). New questions were added to meet the aims of the study, while others were omitted as they were not deemed relevant to the present study. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: the first questions focused on obtaining biographical data, such as gender, current educational level, and socio-economic status of the family. The second part contained items seeking information about the students' reasons for choosing their vocational college and their attitudes towards their current experiences. The third part covered their perceptions of future career and job opportunities. In total, there were 31 questions, many of which were divided into sub-questions.

After the questionnaire had been designed, it was carefully translated into Chinese and pre-tested with 10 participants, before being ready to use with a larger set of participants. Pre-testing a questionnaire with a small number of respondents can 'test the procedures and quality of responses' (Walliman, 2010, p. 175). Further improvements were made based on the feedback and comments gathered from the pre-test; for example, some sub-questions were revised and more options were offered for the respondents to choose between.

Access to the two sample colleges was granted by the administrators of each college in March 2017. The questionnaire was distributed to the students in the two sample colleges during the fall semester of 2017 via a social networking application WeChat. I was introduced to the classes by their teachers, and the participants were assured that the questionnaire was not connected to their courses and would have no bearing on their grades. Moreover, it was underlined that their participation would be entirely voluntary. They were also made aware of the aims of the project. I gave them the instructions for completing the questionnaire, and stressed the importance of giving careful and accurate answers. The participants were encouraged to complete the questionnaire on their smartphones or laptops in the last 20 minutes of their classes. They usually took between 9 and 20 minutes to complete and submit the questionnaire. The participants were also encouraged to forward the link to the questionnaire to their friends in other classes or programmes of the same college. The total number of the distributed questionnaires was 200 and the response rate was 100%. The sample was made up of 46% male students and 54% female; 35% were in their first year, 44% were in their second or third years, and 21% were in their final year.

The study areas of the respondents fall into four categories: finance and management (35%), engineering (14%), language (28%), and IT (23%).

3.5.2 Stage 2—Focus group

At the end of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to indicate if they would like to be invited to the focus group and interview sessions. In this way, 16 students at Riverside and 20 students at Seaside were recruited for the focus group sessions. Four focus groups were conducted at each college with students majoring in chemical engineering, marketing, business, English, and IT. The duration of these focus groups ranged from 40 to 90 minutes.

The focus group is a means for collecting the shared understandings of several individuals, as well as to get the views of specific people (Creswell, 2012, p. 218). It is 'a highly efficient qualitative data-collection technique' (Patton, 1990, pp. 335-6) and allows 'the researcher to develop an understanding about *why* people feel the way they do' (Bryman, 2012, p. 503). In focus groups, the interactions among group members enable individuals to discuss issues with each other and challenge each other's views, which could 'yield more interesting and realistic accounts of what people think' (Bryman, 2012, p. 504). Interaction is the essence of focus groups because it unveils the reality of the group and provides an understanding about how the group members think and express their viewpoints (Ivanoff and Hultberg, 2006, p. 127).

Several issues were considered when designing the focus groups, including the group composition, the number of participants, and the moderating style. Since the participants in this study have similar lived experiences as vocational students, the focus groups should be homogenous and consist of familiar faces (Liamputtong, 2011). The recommended number of participates in a focus group ranges from 3 to 15 (Lewis, 1992, p. 418). The size of the focus group is important to consider to ensure maximum interaction and an environment in which participants can actively discuss in a group (Smithson, 2008). Four focus groups were conducted in each college, with 4 to 8 participants in each group. A flexible moderating style was adopted for conducting the focus groups of this study so as to allow the participants to 'do most of the talking, thus providing rich descriptions of social life and in-depth explanations of social processes' (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 184).

A list of possible topics for discussion was developed before conducting the focus groups, as this 'helps make interviewing a number of different people more systematic and

comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored' (Patton, 2002, p. 343). The topics by and large covered four themes: the students' past choice-making stories, their current college experiences, their aspirations for the future, and their attitudes towards the stereotyping. The focus group sessions usually began with the participants introducing themselves, which helped to reduce any tension and create a more comfortable sharing environment. There was then a section in which each participant shared their choice-making stories, during which many of them reported similar experiences. They also discussed their attitudes to the current curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and facilities in the colleges. During the discussions, their interactions, whether complementary or argumentative, all evoked a great deal of valuable information and reflections. The last section allowed them to talk about their plans for the future and their thoughts on the potential stereotyping of vocational students.

3.5.3 Stage 3—Narrative interview

The participants in the narrative interview sessions were recruited from the questionnaire respondents and from the focus group participants. Nine narrative interviews were conducted at each college and each lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Interviews are a useful means for uncovering interviewees' views and meanings regarding a situation and their reality (Punch, 1998). Martin Bauer defines the narrative interview as 'a setting which encourages and stimulates interviewees to tell a story about some significant event in the informants' life' (1996, p. 2). It goes beyond the question-response-type interview and follows 'self-generating schema', using everyday communicative interaction, namely storytelling and listening. The narrative interview is used to investigate 'hot issues', which may be potentially embarrassing for respondents or be of a personal nature (Bauer, 1996). Since the participants of this study are vocational students who have not performed well academically or who may have struggled during their learning history or might consider their "vocational student status" embarrassing due to the popular stereotypes, a narrative interview is particularly useful for providing 'a more sensitive approach' to investigating these issues (Bauer, 1996, p. 12). The central topics of the narrative interview in this study were the students' previous personal and educational experiences; their current vocational education experiences; their perspectives on the future possibilities; and their attitudes towards the popular stereotypes. The narrative interview consisted of four phases:

    I—   initiation

    II—   main narration

III— questioning phase

IV— concluding talk (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000)

In the initiation phase, the interviewees were informed of the procedures and the topics, so as to trigger the process of narration (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000, p. 63). When the narration started, it was not interrupted until the interviewee signalled the end of the story. I limited myself to active listening, providing non-verbal or paralinguistic support to show interest, while writing down the questions to ask in the next phase (2000, p. 64). I also wrote down the 'markers', i.e. the passing references 'made by a respondent to an important event or feeling state', to elicit further reflections (Weiss, 1994). The uninterrupted narration phase was followed by a questioning phase, which included immanent questions to complete the gaps in the interviewees' stories, as well as to further probe interesting points emerging in their questionnaire responses or comments made in the focus groups. At the end of the interview, there was a brief talking phase which could provide additional information to enable contextual interpretations of the informants' accounts (Bauer, 1996, p. 8).

The present study also included semi-structured interviews with teaching staff. The teachers were asked about their experiences of assisting the students and their opinions about the prevalent attitudes towards vocational college and vocational students. The teaching staff also provided their opinions on the current curricula in their colleges. Three members of the teaching staff at Seaside were interviewed. As Riverside is a publicly funded college which is closely supervised by the Party, it was difficult to recruit any college staff for interview. But one of the teachers at Riverside did agree to do an interview on the condition that there would be no recording.

3.6 Pilot study

The pilot study was designed to test the theoretical framework developed for this study (see Chapter 2) as well as some of its research instruments. In this study's initial form, collaborative autobiographies and narrative interviews were designed to gather the necessary information about the students' shared experiences. However, after being tested in the pilot study, collaborative autobiography was found to be less suitable for this study.

Collaborative autobiographies are tools for 'sharing personal and professional experiences in a group setting', which can 'promote collegiality within a group by stimulating shared

reflection on experiences and insights disclosed by individual members' (Lally and Scaefe, 1995, p. 325).

Lally and Scaife studied a group of teachers using collaborative autobiography to empower themselves and reconstruct the complex relationships between power, knowledge, ideology and schooling. They argue that 'the use of collaborative autobiography created a more accepting climate for reflection about the personal histories of members of the group' and 'sharing and articulating led to clarification of new pathways to future action: this discussion had generated a sense of professional empowerment' (1995, p. 326). Hauserman studied two vice-principles who used collaborative autography for professional development (Hauserman, 1993). The participants were able to share 'information about past experience', during which he noticed 'reoccurring themes that can be linked to actions that the individuals are taking in the present' (1993, p. 19). Butt et al. (1990) state that in collaborative autobiography settings, the participants are provided the opportunity to evolve their personal and professional life stories in collaboration with others so that all participants gain a collective perspective while catalysing the writing and interpretation of each other's stories (1990, p. 257). By interacting with peers and reflecting on experiences, individual experiences are added 'the synergistic effect' by being in 'a group with a common problem, being in the same (experiential) boat and sharing a common purpose' (1990, p. 263). It provides positive interpersonal support and mutual affirmation and creates a sheltered environment for taking risks (Wideen, 1989).

While the authenticity, completeness and validity of the narrative data might be questionable, by using collaborative exercise, the stories are grounded in 'current reality, illustrated by vignettes, provides a measure of reality-testing', to check 'over-fictionalised accounts or rationalisations' (Butt and Raymond, 1989, p. 414). The participant-observers in this collaborative group witness the validity of others' accounts and the congruence between the story and observation. Trust can be built up within 'the conditions of narrative interaction, and the authentic examples of others' encourage participants to unmask and disclose underlying problems' (p. 414). In this way, the 'counter-biographies' of the various participants provide 'a horizontal cross-checking' of accounts; and the multiple draft-making over time represents a type of 'longitudinal or vertical cross-checking' (p. 414).

The following collaborative autobiography activities were originally designed for the study:
Phase 1 introduction:

1.1 introducing the research project

1.2 introducing the participants

Phase 2 reflections on past personal and educational life:

2.1 each student is asked to talk about the life experiences and influences that affected their personal and educational decisions, as well as their typical experiences of exercising agency

2.2 a preliminary discussion of each memory; exchanging views, perceptions, commonalities and differences in the reflections

Phase 3 critical appraisal of current situation:

3.1 reflective talking about their opinions of their current educational condition

3.2 sharing their reflections, responding to each other's reflections, discussing similarities and differences in their views, talking about the major issues.

Phase 4 reflection on the future:

4.1 reflective talking about their opinions of their future plans

4.2 sharing their reflections and discussing similarities and differences as well as the major issues concerning their forming of career aims

4.3 group discussion: what they have learned from this activity and the value of the activity for them

Unfortunately, many of the participants in the sessions were reluctant to share their reflections and respond to others' reflections. This was especially the case with those who thought that their difficult learning experiences were too embarrassing to share in front of their peers. Others were worried about offending their peers by commenting on their experiences. I found out later that some participants had experienced family crises or difficulties at school which they were not comfortable about revealing to their peers. Collaborative autobiography gives each individual participant the opportunity to share, yet, at the same time, it puts pressure on every participant to tell their stories in a group setting. I observed that the participants felt as if they were 'being put in the spotlight' when they were asked to share. Thus, the information they revealed was very limited and may simply have been their 'public voice', rather than their 'inner voice' (Seidman, 2006). Collaborative autobiography also requires at least three meetings, each of which lasts at least 60 minutes. It is difficult to arrange these meetings and ensure the same participants attend every time. Therefore, I decided to replace collaborative autobiography with the focus group method, so that the participants would feel less pressured to share or comment and the flow of their inner voice would be much less inhibited. This way, the participants were not being forced into the spotlight. The resulting group interactions were improved as the participants appeared

more relaxed and carefree. Those who felt less comfortable talking about their experiences in a group could choose not to do so, and I would invite them for a private narrative interview if they were willing to participate. The focus groups were also more flexible and easier to arrange than the collaborative autobiography groups. Reflecting on my experience with the collaborative autobiography method, I would suggest that it may be less suitable for studies such as this which involve sensitive topics or experiences that might be considered embarrassing or uncomfortable to share and comment on.

After adjusting the research instruments, one focus group (eight participants per group) was conducted at each college with students from mixed subject areas and levels of study. Four narrative interviews were conducted at each college. The feedback and reflections generated from the pilot study informed the questionnaire design. Critical questions were added to the questionnaire, relating to matters such as the student's internship experiences and their preparation for obtaining relevant qualifications or certificates. The pilot study served as an evaluation of the data collection methods and provided valuable experience in using the various techniques. The theoretical framework was also demonstrated to be relevant and suitable for this study.

3.7 Data analysis

3.7.1 Quantitative data analysis

The data collected through the questionnaire was analysed using the 23.0 version of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The data was entered, coded and recoded in SPSS. The data provides an important quantitative dimension to the study. Descriptive statistical procedures are required for this study as they could provide general information about the group investigated, regardless of whether or not inferences about a population are to be made (Black, 1993, p. 97). The procedures included describing frequency distribution, measuring central tendency and deriving indicators of variability.

3.7.2 Qualitative data analysis

The qualitative data generated from the focus group sessions and narrative interviews was analysed using NVivo. Coding procedures and techniques (see Figure 3.2) proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) were adopted for this study.

Figure 3.2 Qualitative data analysis

Open coding and reflecting
(discovering concepts/properties/dimensions by various analytic tools i.e. asking questions/comparison/red flags, etc.)

Axial coding
(Connecting the dots: linking concepts/properties/dimensions, identifying their relations)

Diagrams/thematic networks and writing up
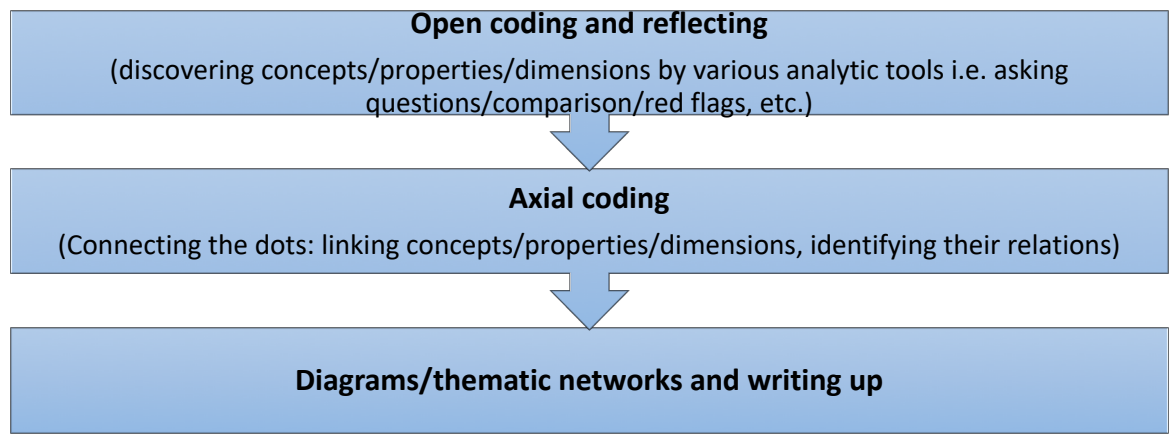
Open coding is the first stage of data analysis. It is the analytic process through which 'concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 101). First of all, line-by-line analysis was used for the close examination of the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.119). Basic operations, such as asking questions and making comparisons, are utilised to open up the line of inquiry and direct theoretical sampling (p. 73). When using open coding, Charmaz suggests researchers ask themselves the following questions about the data: What is going on? What are the people doing? What is the person saying? What do these actions and statements take for granted? How do structure and context serve to support, maintain, impede or change these actions and statements? (Charmaz, 2003, pp. 94-5). Making comparisons can stimulate thinking about properties and dimensions of categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 73). Moreover, analytic tools such as analysis of a word, phrase, or sentence; the flip-flop technique; and waving the red flag were all used to bring out certain dimensions of the data. Throughout the entire data analysis process, reflections and thoughts were kept in memos. Memo writing is an important element of analysis, as it provides a mechanism to elaborate the processes, assumptions and actions that are subsumed under the code (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2003). This step was conducted using NVivo, where memos were linked to the relevant content and instant comments on emerging themes were established.

An example of line-by-line analysis is provided below in Table 3.1, relating to a participant sharing her experience of taking the CEE exam. As Table 3.1 demonstrates, I developed categories based on the descriptive codes generated from the data. I also recorded my thoughts and interpretations of the underlined data in memos.

Table 3.1—Coding process

	Excerpt from a transcript of a focus group session	Descriptive codes	Categories
1	Unfortunately, I didn't manage to test well on CEE.	Didn't test well	
2	Perhaps, I was overly stressed because I had been working non-stop from 6am to 11pm for a year, with <u>tons of school work as well as extra exam prep courses my parents arranged for me.</u>	Pre-CEE efforts	Disciplinary power
3	Just before the exam, I just felt awfully stressed and I did sort of play for a while because I was so tired.	Pressure	
4	<u>My mom was so pissed, and she scolded me every day.</u>	Parental expectation	
5	I guess that's why I didn't test well, I indulged myself when I shouldn't.	Self-indulging	Self-blaming
6	<u>When I think about that, I realise that there is a saying: "One always becomes the victim of one's own evil deeds" [I have myself to blame].</u>	Victim of her evil deeds	
7	I think I am the kind of person that just gets stage fright so easily. I may always be well-prepared, but I always fail at key moments.	Stage fright	
8	<u>I may never amount to anything [not get anywhere]</u>	Achieve nothing	
Memos			
	1) The mother's behaviours and attitudes (arranged prep courses for her; scolded her when she was playing) demonstrated her high expectations of her daughter's academic achievement. This enacted and reinforced the disciplinary power, which pressurised the student to perform well academically.		
	2) The belief in the meritocracy of the system (more effort equals better exam outcomes, and good grades also indicate the efforts a student makes). But they failed to see that the "good" or "bad" of their grades is always in comparison with others. There is always a certain percentage of students that will be channelled to vocational college. It's irrelevant how hard individual pupil worked. For them, it's always down to the individual, because of the "fairness of the meritocratic system".		
	3) For a student, having their achievements recognised by parents/society is only possible through an exam. Students who "didn't test well/had bad test skills" may be automatically shut out of future opportunities to "get anywhere".		

The second stage of the qualitative data analysis process is axial coding. This involves reassembling data and relating categories to their subcategories. It generates 'mini-frameworks' that helps 'the researcher to understand the relationship between concepts' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 141). Diagrams or thematic networks (Attride-Stirling, 2001) were used to visualise the relationships between categories and discover breaks in logic (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 238). An example of the diagram is provided below in Figure 3.3. Subcategories such as "parental expectations", "previous schooling experience" and "ceiling effect from the job market" make up the "disciplinary power", which is a main category. "Disciplinary power" leads to "self-blaming" and generates "pre-CEE efforts and pressure". The diagrams helped me visually analyse how different (sub-)categories are related to each other.

Figure 3.3 Axial coding
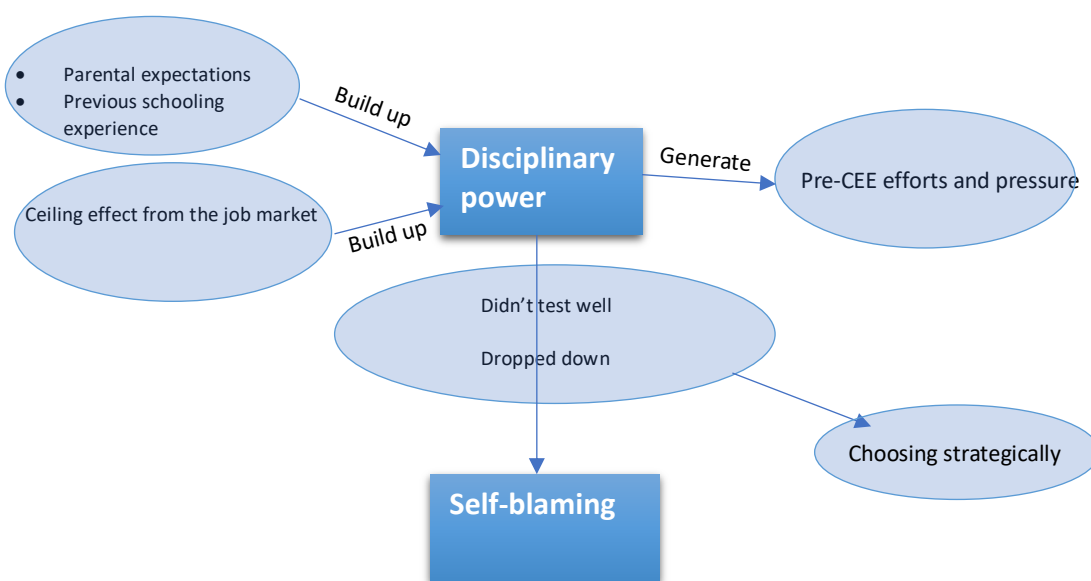
During the writing-up process, vignettes were used to present the qualitative data in Chapter 7. Vignettes are 'short descriptions of a person or a social situation which contain precise references to what are thought to be the most important factors in the decision-making processes of respondents' (Lee, 1993, p. 79). They are useful for providing information regarding participants' experiences, perceptions, beliefs and attitudes (Hughes, 1998, p. 381).

3.8 Linking data

As mentioned above, a mixed methods research design requires collecting, analysing and 'mixing' both quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell, 2012). It is not simply a matter of collecting two distinct strands of research—qualitative and quantitative. It consists of merging, integrating, linking, or embedding the two strands (Creswell, 2012, p. 535). The purpose of integrating quantitative and qualitative research is to develop results and interpretations that expand understanding, are comprehensive, and are validated and confirmed (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017, p. 221). To accomplish this aim, it is necessary to demonstrate how these two sets of data are linked together and to what extent the quantitative and qualitative results converge, diverge, relate to each other, and produce a more complete understanding. This section also addresses a potential limitation associated with this type of mixed methods design: the lack of overt linkages between the structured and unstructured responses.

The quantitative and qualitative data converge when the results of each dataset are similar (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017, p. 228). The majority of the interview/focus group session participants were able to validate their questionnaire responses. These two datasets are largely converging. For example, in a focus group session, the students were asked to give their reasons for their dissatisfaction with their college experience, as stated in their questionnaire. Some explained in detail the didactic and lecture-based way of teaching in their classes, others pointed to the problem of student disengagement and the ineffectiveness of the pedagogy.

Despite the convergence of the data, some contradictions and divergences were still found when comparing these two datasets. For example, in a focus group session, students Wenbo and Junlan expressed their discontent about the teaching standards, yet they had rated the teaching positively in their questionnaires. When contradictory findings emerged from the data comparison, I collected additional data to help shed light on the discrepancies (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017, p. 233). After additional investigation, it became clear that some participants had been concerned about the possible negative consequences they would face if their teachers had access to their questionnaire answers, despite being told that the questionnaire was not connected in any way to their course or grades. On some level, the participants were sensitised when the questionnaires were distributed, as I had been introduced to them by their teachers in a classroom environment. This sensitisation may have been removed if the questionnaires had been administered in a more causal environment with no presence of the teaching staff.

Another interesting finding emerging from the integration of these two datasets was that new insights were generated when the qualitative data expanded and complemented the quantitative data. Reflecting on this integration, I was able to 'capture a more complete and fuller picture' (Bryman, 2012, p. 637), which further enriched the discussion of the research questions. For example, in this study, 79% of the student sample at Seaside rated the standard of teaching at their college favourably (see Table 4.2 in Chapter 4). However, when an opportunity was given to the participants in the interview/focus group sessions to explain their ratings, they revealed the tension and distance between teaching and learning:

> Jia: I think our teachers are great.
> Tao: Yes, they have been very helpful to me. One of them advised me on my vocabulary learning when I seek help from her.

Int: Anything you are not happy about?

Jia: The problem is I cannot get anything into my brain. I cannot learn anything. Well…that's my problem, not the teachers' fault.

Int: Why is this your problem?

Jia: Things are just too hard and dense for me. I cannot understand what they were teaching in class. (Riverside)

It is apparent that the students saw a distance between the way teachers teach and the way they learn; therefore, they privatised a structural failure as an individual one. A final year student shared a similar view:

Qinqiang: I think all of them [teachers] are very qualified and professional, and they deliver quality lessons. I have nothing negative to say about that. But many classmates still have been struggling with school work for four years, haven't been learning anything and are repeatedly retaking the exams. I assume it is all due to them. You just cannot blame this on the college, they have been more than helpful.

This tension between what they believe to be 'quality lessons' and the actual experience of 'struggling with school work' emerges when comparing both datasets. The qualitative research managed to capture the subtle and nuanced yet important inconsistency behind the ratings in the questionnaire. As Strauss and Corbin explain in their book, the questionnaire asks about 'what people believe', while the fieldwork was about 'what people do'. These 'discrepancies between belief and action' can only be explored by further investigation into what appeared from the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 32). Moreover, the discrepancies constructively informed the understanding of how young people direct the blame onto themselves and their individualisation processes in vocational colleges. Therefore, in a mixed methods design, the interpretation of the findings involves not only identifying points of congruence and discrepancy, but also working to understand how these points provide additional insight into the problem being studied (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017, p. 234).

3.9 Ethical considerations

The following question posed by Denscombe emphasises the importance of ethical research: 'Have the rights and interests of those affected by the research been taken into consideration?' (Denscombe, 2002, p. 174). All the measures required to maintain privacy, veracity,

confidentiality, data protection and fidelity were taken (Kent, 2000). Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the ethics committee at University of Glasgow.

At the beginning of the questionnaire, there was a plain language statement explaining in more detail the purpose of the data collection, as well as a consent form, which emphasised that participation was voluntary and that the participants had the right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. As the participants were not required to provide their names, their confidentiality was protected. For the focus group and narrative interviews, the participants were provided with plain language statements and consent forms to read and sign, followed by a clear explanation from me wherever there were doubts.

For this project, the participants would be asked to disclose various issues relating to their pasts, as well as their problems and concerns regarding their current college programmes. I made clear to the participants that it was possible that the research project could cause them some distress as they would be asked about their educational experiences. They were informed about the mechanisms in place for dealing with any distress caused. One student did indeed experience distress as a result of her school recollections. During a narrative interview session at Riverside College, a female participant was reduced to tears when reminiscing about her earlier educational experiences. Growing up in the most remote region of China, she experienced difficulties in accessing formal education, and she was also physically and emotionally abused during her secondary schooling. I paused the session and provided a safe space in which she could release her distress. I advised the participant to attend counselling sessions provided by the college as well as by an external institution and followed up to check that she had been able to recover from her reminiscing.

My fieldwork involved carefully listening to the life stories told by vocational students. Some of the unfortunate stories (e.g. the one mentioned above) caused me mental distress, which continued even after I had completed my fieldwork. I discussed with my supervisors my experiences during the fieldwork as well as my feelings of distress. As experienced researchers, my supervisors provided me with the necessary assistance and advice on this matter. They also directed me to the counselling service at the university, although I was then not able to arrange an appointment. Fortunately, these feelings of distress have since been resolved.

One potential ethical issue relating to this research is that it requires the encouragement of disclosure while also ensuring the ethical handling of personal data. While confidentiality can be assured with the questionnaire and one-to-one narrative interviews, this is less straightforward with the focus group sessions. Before each focus group session, the participants were asked to respect each other's confidentiality; but they were also informed that the interviewer could obviously not guarantee this. The ethical code of confidentiality was emphasised at every stage of the research process, from data collection to data analysis and dissemination of research results.

This chapter has presented the details of the research methods adopted to investigate vocational youth's experiences and opinions. The next four chapters will present the findings collected in both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research.

Chapter 4 Findings—THE PAST: choosing a vocational college and programme

4.1 Introduction

The findings of this study are presented in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7. Chapter 4 covers students' experiences of choosing a vocational college and programme (Research Question 1). Chapter 5 examines the students' current experiences within college (Research Question 2). Chapter 6 presents their perspectives on the job market and future careers (Research Question 3). Chapter 7 provides their perceptions of the stereotyping of vocational students (Research Question 4).

In this chapter, quantitative and qualitative findings are presented to uncover student experiences of making educational choices within an 'institutionally structured risk environment' (Giddens, 1991). The chapter focuses on answering the first research question: What are the students' experiences of choosing a vocational college and programme? When making a choice about their post-secondary education, the students seemed more concerned about their College Entrance Exam (CEE) score meeting the admission requirements than they were about which college they would attend (see Table 4.1). This chapter investigates how they fulfilled their choice-making responsibilities and decided to enrol in vocational colleges.

At the end of Part I of the questionnaire, the students were asked to select their main reasons for choosing their vocational colleges and programmes (see Table 4.1 below). The respondents could select as many reasons as they wished. Although locality was an important factor, four out of five students at Seaside selected test scores as their main reason for choosing this college, while half of the students at Riverside did so. While less than a quarter of the Riverside students considered the college reputation and the provision of suitable courses to be their main reasons, these factors were selected by even fewer students at Seaside (22% and 15% respectively).

Table 4.1—Reasons for student choice of vocational college/programme

	Riverside (Public) Percentage	Seaside (Private) Percentage
Test score	50%	80%
Locality	45%	43%
College has a good reputation	25%	22%
Suitable course/appropriate course content	23%	15%
Recommended by others	23%	11%
Other reason	3%	4%

As the questionnaire results indicate, concerns over their CEE test scores were what motivated most of the students to attend vocational college. It is necessary to ask why the test score factor is so significant in their decision-making process and what their experiences were like in this respect. The qualitative data help us understand the reason behind the students' responses.

In their narratives, the students reflected on their experiences at high school, where they had prepared for the College Entrance Exam (CEE). Many considered that they did not 'test well' and had 'dropped down', and they had chosen a vocational college as a last resort.

4.2 Preparing for the CEE

Counter to the widely-held stereotype that vocational students are bad and lazy young people, they saw themselves as well-behaved and hardworking when recalling their experiences of preparing for the CEE:

> I had always been a good student. Really. I started studying in the morning until 10pm every day in school. And I would study more after I got back home. (Hai, Riverside)

> I think I was a very diligent student in high school. I was always so focused in class and never skipped one lesson. (Jiren, Seaside)

After hearing more stories about their secondary schooling from the students, I realised that the diligence and commitment referred to in Hai and Jiran's statements were in fact a result of being pushed by the demanding, high-pressure secondary schooling. They were forced to be 'diligent' and study 'until 10 pm' Students from more populated provinces like Henan which has fiercer competition for college places, were more pressured to put more efforts into their CEE preparation. Hence, Yuehan's three years in high school were 'pure suffering':

> High schools in my hometown are just hell. We never ever got a break. Comparing with other students in the northeast [three provinces in the northeast of China] who started their day at 7 or 8am, we arrived in our classroom at 5:30am. Seriously. I studied until 7am to eat breakfast, which I needed to finish in 20 minutes. It was pure suffering and you will never want to experience high school ever again. This is very common in high schools in my hometown. Every school is like that. (Yuehan, Seaside)

Yuehan's high school experience was 'just hell', hence she would 'never want to experience high school ever again'. This could be the reason for these students trying to avoid the option of repeating their senior year and re-taking their CEE. Similar to Yuehan's situation, Yifan noted how her time had been arranged for her in the previous three years and her feelings at the end:

> I was overly stressed because I had been working non-stop from 6am to 11pm for a year, with tons of school work as well as extra exam prep courses my parents arranged for me. Just before the exam, I just felt awfully stressed and tired, and wished I could play for just a little bit. (Yifan, Riverside)

The exam system puts numerous students under a great deal of pressure. Yifan was 'awfully stressed and tired' even before taking the exam. Xiu also felt the pressure to work harder and perform better in exams:

> I think I have always valued my studies very much and I wanted to get better [scores]. I forced and pressured myself to study. The more study I did, the more tired I felt. I even thought about it when I went to sleep. So, I never got any good sleep and I could not focus in class. But I still wanted to get better and worked harder. (Xiu, Seaside)

As Xiu stated, the students 'forced and pressured' themselves to study and 'get better scores'. The intensive exam-focused high schools were to train and prepare them to compete in the CEE. However, the efforts they invested during the exam preparation were not rewarded with 'better scores'.

4.3 'Didn't test well' or 'just not good enough'

The majority of the students commented on their experiences of taking the CEE with a great deal of resignation. Some blamed themselves for having poor test skills or 'stage fright' when struggling at the bottleneck of this high-stakes exam system:

> I think it must be that I did not know how to take tests in high school. Even though I made so much effort, I still could not test well enough. (Jiren, Seaside)

> I think I am the kind of person that just gets stage fright so easily. I may always be well-prepared, but I always fail at key moments. (Yifan, Riverside)

Others, however, attributed their CEE failure to their inferiority in academic work, or simply to having 'no school brain':

> I have always thought of myself as being a slow, no school brain kind of student. My classmates may know the stuff after the teacher explains it once or twice. For me, I needed to go back and forth many times. (Xiaoxin, Riverside)

As can be seen from the above statements, the students attributed their "failure" in the CEE to their own shortcomings, such as Jiren's poor test-taking skills, Yifan's 'stage fright', and Xiaoxin's 'no school brain'. They did their best to overcome their shortcomings, but this could still not be good enough. Even if they make extraordinary efforts to improve their test scores, this will count for little if everyone else does the same or better. Therefore, students have found themselves being 'dropped down' from their preferred upper-tier universities or colleges. Sometimes, however, being dropped down has little connection to their test performance.

4.4 'I was dropped down'

Bo was confused when he found out that he had been dropped down:

I didn't think I had a bad [CEE] score. 530 was a good score for me. I guess I was just not good enough. The cut-off lines that year were so high. This college was the 7th [the last one] on my list. I could not believe that I had been dropped down this far to the bottom. (Bo, Seaside)

How far the students were dropped down was entirely dependent on the cut-off lines, which relate to every other high school students' performance in the CEE. Bo had thought he had done well in the exam and so did not expect to be 'dropped down this far to the bottom'. These students were left to deal with the uncertainty alone. Some of them realised they had little control over the result of this nation-wide competition. They had adopted a rather deterministic or fatalistic perspective on this matter:

I feel like the CEE decides things once and for all. I was not willing to come here [to a vocational college]. But I cannot do anything about it. I guess this is fate. (Wei, Riverside)

4.5 Leftover options

It was not only the CEE results that the students felt were out of their control; they also felt powerless when their college options were automatically limited by the process of being dropped down. Their enrolling in a vocational college was only a last resort or a 'leftover option'. In a group session at Riverside, a young man named Hai shared his story:
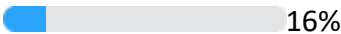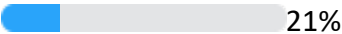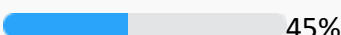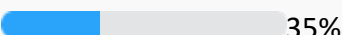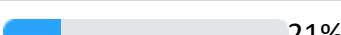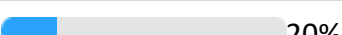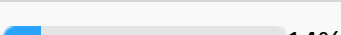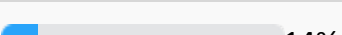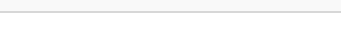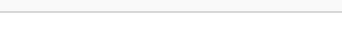
[…] So I got my [CEE] grade, which was just at the cut-off line of the second-tier college. Well, I guess second-tier colleges won't consider me at all, so perhaps I will go to the third-tier then. But I was dropped down. It [the score] was still not good enough. So there were not many options left other than vocational colleges for me. There was nothing I could do. So here I am. And that is it. (Hai, Riverside)

Hai was not alone. Every student I interviewed wished they had achieved a better grade to enable them to enrol at a top-tier academic university. As can be seen from Hai's comments, attending vocational college was the outcome of him being dropped down to the bottom tier of the post-secondary choices. Having a less desirable CEE score, the students were not only facing the "leftover" vocational colleges, but also "leftover" programmes.

4.6 Academic gambling

After accepting the fact that they were only allowed to choose from vocational colleges, the students had to decide on which programme they would enrol or in what subject they would like to major. In the questionnaire, Question 12 gives students an opportunity to express to what extent they were interested in the particular programme they had chosen (see Table 4.2 below).

Table 4.2—To what extent were the students interested in the programme they chose?

	Riverside (Public) Percentage	Seaside (Private) Percentage
Very interested in it	16%	21%
Somewhat interested in it	45%	35%
Unsure	21%	20%
Not that interested in it	14%	14%
Not at all interested in it	4%	10%
Total	100	100

As can be seen, 61% of the student sample in Riverside reported that they were interested in the programme on some level, whereas 56% of the Seaside students expressed a similar attitude. Almost a quarter of respondents at Seaside and one in five of them at Riverside were not attracted to the programmes they chose. A fifth of the student sample in each college were still not certain if the programme would match their interest at the time of their decision making. How did the students articulate their interest in the chosen programme? Why did a considerable percentage of the students choose a programme that they had no interest in or knowledge about? This result can be explored using the qualitative data gathered in the interviews and group sessions.

Some of the students explained that even though they had been dropped down, they had still managed to make a decision based on their own interests:

> I chose my major according to my interests. I like history and language. So, I put down "English", "Chinese literature" and "history" for every college I applied to. (Bo, Seaside)

According to Bo, for every institution to which he applied, from top-tier universities to vocational colleges, he made sure he could be enrolled in a programme that related to his interests. Whilst Bo, who was fortunate enough to be enrolled in a programme that matched his interests, for others, the sole purpose of enrolling in a programme was the chance to gain admission to the college. A student with a disadvantaged CEE score needed to first guarantee she or he held an entry ticket to college before even considering whether the programmes that provided match her or his interest. Hence, in this case, these students needed to be highly strategic when deciding on a programme, as a slight oversight or miscalculation could result in their being dropped down again or even having no college to go to at all.

When Xiaoxin was explaining his reasons for choosing to study as his major cost engineering (a programme deals with managing the costs of engineering projects), he revealed a great deal of resignation:

> When filling out that [application] form, it was not about picking which programmes I have an interest in, but about trying to find out which one was still available for me. I could not be the chooser here and there were not many left for me to choose from. Lots of people wanted to get in [to this college]. The best thing to do was to stay away from other students' [choices of majors]. Because let's face it, I didn't score as high as others. Higher scoring people got to pick first. After that, there was only accounting, marketing, and this one left. Those were the only programmes that were not full. (Xiaoxin, Riverside)

As Xiaoxin mentioned above, the vocational students could not afford to be the 'choosers' in this respect. They were required to be strategic and calculate their chances by considering their choices in relation to factors like the popularity and capacity of a programme, as these indicate the probability of them getting admitted.
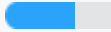
> I was below the cut-off lines, which meant I may have no college to go to. But I really didn't want to prepare for the CEE again and retake it next year. So, I was staring at the list on the screen and I spotted this programme at this college, which had more than 20 spots left. I thought the chances were not bad. So, I just decided to go for it and here I am. (Jiahui, Seaside)

It is evident that there was a high level of risk involved in making this choice for vocational students. They had entered into institutionalised academic gambling on their educational futures, which involving countless uncertainties and limited guidance. They were compelled to make their choices and negotiate these risks. When they "decided" on a programme in which they had little interest, they then needed to find ways to come to terms with this decision.

4.7 Coming to terms with it

It is apparent that the options for students with lower scores were significantly restricted. If enrolling on a certain programme is sometimes more about getting into college than pursuing personal career goals, then it is likely that these choices impact the students' initial career plans or aspirations. In the questionnaire, three questions were designed to investigate this issue. Question 18 asked whether they had changed their career goals since choosing their programme, and was followed by two open-ended questions (19 and 20) to be answered if they responded "yes". The students were asked to write what those views had been before and after choosing their programmes (see Table 4.3 below).

Table 4.3—Since choosing this college and this programme, have you changed your views and wishes about the job or profession you would like to take up?

	Riverside (Public)		Seaside (Private)	
	Percentage		Percentage	
Yes		40%		45%
No		34%		25%
I don't know		26%		30%
Total	100		100	

The above table shows that only a third of the student sample in Riverside and a quarter of the Seaside students had followed their career plans when choosing their vocational programmes. Almost two out of five students in each college admitted that their original wishes had been changed by their choices of vocational programmes. In their responses to Question 19, they wrote down their previous career goals, with occupations like teacher, engineer, company manager and journalist appearing multiple times. When articulating their current views, some (60 students in total) wrote down the jobs or fields that were relevant to their majors, while others (25 students in total) simply had no career plans for the time being.

From Table 4.3, it can be seen that approximately one third of students in each college answered "I don't know" for this question, which means that it is possible that they had no previous career plan or aspiration when making their educational choices.

A remarkably large number of students (40% at Riverside and 45% at Seaside) who were forced to compromise their previous career plans had come to terms with their choices and sometimes even accepted subjects that least interested them:

> Int: How did you feel when you found out that you were going to study English as your major for four years?
>
> Yuehan: It was awful. I have always been struggling with English and never liked it at all. But if I didn't go for this, I would have to re-do a year of preparation and retake the CEE. So, I had to bite the bullet and do it.
>
> Int: Were there any other choices?
>
> Yuehan: No. There were no other choices, unless I had a better score. This was the best choice for getting into a college and avoiding having to repeat the CEE.
>
> Int: What were your preferred choices?
>
> Yuehan: I have always been interested in finance or accounting because my mum is an accountant and also a teacher in accounting. I have always found it fascinating.
>
> Mei: For me, I never thought I would study English as a major. I always thought I could be a human resource manager in a big company before. My English was ok back in high school. But I never intended to study this. After I got here and sat in classes, I was never in the mood for study and had a hard time focusing on it. I keep telling myself: 'I need to do this as I am already here.' (Seaside)

Jiaxin, who is on a mechanical automatisation programme at Riverside, articulated her pervious ambitions:

> I wanted to study IT. I like playing around with computers and learning how they work. But considering my CEE scores, it was unlikely I could get in a college with good IT-related programmes. So, I had to accept this programme since I'd chosen this already. (Jiaxin, Riverside)

4.8 Uncertain future

In order to find out why a significant percentage of students claimed not to know whether or not their choices had changed their initial plans, I probed them about this issue in the interview and in the group sessions. It is highly surprising and disturbing to learn how impetuous and unsupported they were during such a supposedly important decision-making process in these youngsters' lives. A considerable number of the students I encountered admitted that they had given little consideration to their post-secondary career paths:

> I never got a chance back then to research what business English [her programme] means. In fact, I didn't know the meaning of many programmes on the list. I was too focused on preparing for the test and I basically only started to think about what I wanted to do or what I would really like to study a few days before filling in the form. My high school teachers didn't give out any guidance or advice, and my parents didn't know much about this. I didn't know what my future would be like. I was completely lost. I suppose I was never that visionary. (Xiu, Seaside)

Other students reported a similar sense of directionless to that experienced by Xiu:

> Guanglu: I didn't know what cost engineering was at that point.
> Int: Did you have any plans for what you would like to study in college back then?
> Guanglu: No. In high school, I was so busy preparing for the exam. There was no time to think about things like that. And I thought that I just needed to get into a college after high school. It will be fine as long as it is a college.
> Int: What if you had scored 700 [the maximum CEE score]? What would you have chosen then?
> Guanglu: I still don't know, even if I had scored 700. I never thought about what exactly I would study in college and what I would do after that.
> Int: Was there anyone helping you at that time?
> Guanglu: Well, my high school teachers' job was to help me get better scores. They would not do anything else after I finished the CEE. My parents never went to college, so they were not very helpful. But they phoned an uncle for me who works for a college.
> Int: Was he helpful?
> Guanglu: I suppose it was helpful because he was the only one giving me actual opinions [suggestions].

Some complained that they had little knowledge about the programmes they were supposed to choose from because there was no time to carry out any thorough research by that point:

> This college only had programmes in English, human resource management, and finance that were not already full at that point. I had no idea what they were about and there was no way to know with such short notice. You could not know which programme wasn't full and find out more about it beforehand. Yet, you had to make a decision before the system was closed. I did not know what to do. I felt so lost. So I just filled in the [application] form with all of them. I came here [English programme] by chance. (Dan, Seaside)

> […] I applied for computer science. But I had no idea what computer science is. I didn't know it involves coding and programming when I was just out of high school. I just knew I had got in. Now I regret my choice and I find myself hating this programme. (Jingren, Seaside)

With limited access to support and guidance, these youngsters were left alone to make plans for their future within a highly competitive hierarchical education system. For all the "choices" they made, and whether or not they were enjoying the programme and the college, they only had themselves to thank or blame.

4.9 Comparing the two colleges

It seems that the privately funded Seaside receives more "dropped-down students" with less interest in their programmes than the state-funded college does. However, despite this difference, students from both colleges shared the similar experience of being "dropped down" and "choosing" from the "leftover options" in their uncertain academic gamble. Approximately 30% more students in Seaside reported that they had chosen their college because of their test scores (see Table 4.1). Riverside had slightly more students (+5%) than Seaside who reported they were very/somewhat interested in the programme they chose, while 6% more Seaside students were not that/at all interested in the programme they had chosen (see Table 4.2). Around 5% more Seaside students changed their views and wishes about the job they would like to take up since choosing their college and programmes (see Table 4.3).

4.10 Summary

From the evidence above, it would appear that the students faced an immense amount of stress in their bids to achieve academic excellence. Despite this, they were still "dropped down" to vocational colleges as a result of their lower CEE scores. They attributed the blame for this "failure" to their own shortcomings, such as not making enough effort, not having a 'school brain', or having poor test skills. When there were limited "left over" programme options available to them, they were forced to be strategic in this high-stake academic gamble in order to maximise their chances of securing a post-secondary education. Some of the students had to accept the programmes that least interested them in order to make sure they 'at least have a college to go to', as they 'cannot be the chooser[s] here'. The findings also show that the students were extremely unprepared and lacked support in their decision-making and career planning process due to their exam-focused secondary education and the unpredictable admissions system.

4.11 Discussion

The findings will be further analysed using the idea of 'risk biography' in the individualisation thesis (Beck, 1996), and the Marxist concept of 'false consciousness' (Engels, 1893) in Chapter 8. The findings in this chapter have revealed young people's eagerness and determination to participate in post-secondary education. The vocational track was used by the students and their families as a last resort to achieve their human capital accumulation (Hansen and Woronov, 2013; Woronov, 2015; Koo, 2016). The young people experienced the 'illusion of control' (Jost, 1995), as they believed they could decide their own test score, and hence their life chances, by working harder, having better exam skills, or overcoming their stage fright. It is apparent that these youngsters were required to "make choices" within a highly competitive hierarchical education system, in which they faced an immense amount of pressure, precariousness, conflict and frustration. The vocational students were forced to negotiate a complex maze of educational routes as part of a 'privatisation of responsibility' process (Bauman, 1992). Students like Xiaoxin and Jiahui calculated the availability and capacity of the vocational programmes, to circumvent the choices of others and place their "bets" on the programme that was most likely to accept them. Within an 'institutionally structured risk environment' (Giddens, 1991), this group of young people had to fulfil their choice-making responsibilities by negotiating the 'threatening risks' (Beck, 1992). After the "choice" had been made, they were about to embark upon their journey in vocational colleges. The next chapter explores their experiences in these vocational colleges.

Chapter 5 Findings—THE PRESENT: experiencing vocational college

5.1 Introduction

As was seen in the last chapter, the students were "dropped down" to the vocational colleges for their post-secondary education. For many years, vocational education has been politically and financially neglected in China in favour of university expansion and has occupied a disadvantaged position in the Chinese educational hierarchy (Luo, 2013; Klorer and Stepan, 2015; Liu and Wang, 2015). Treated as inferior alternatives or fallback schools for failed scholars, vocational colleges in China face issues like poor training quality and weak links to industry (Xu, 2006; Shi, 2013; Stewart, 2015; Yi et al., 2018). This chapter explores the students' experiences in vocational colleges, including what they think about the content of the classes (curriculum), how "vocational" they consider those classes to be, the ways content is delivered (pedagogy), how the students are evaluated (assessment), how supportive they think the staff are, and their internship experiences. The opinions of the teaching staff are also explored. The findings in this chapter address Research Question 2: How do young people experience attending vocational college? and What are their perspectives on the vocational programmes as preparation for the world of work?

Table 5.1—Levels of satisfaction with college experience in terms of a number of factors (Riverside, n=100)

Riverside (Public)	Highly satisfied	Fairly Satisfied	Unsure	Not very satisfied	Not at all satisfied
Physical surroundings, i.e. buildings, classrooms	32%	31%	8%	18%	11%
The standard of teaching/lecturing	26%	41%	14%	12%	7%
The amount of work set	22%	36%	20%	14%	8%
Course content	23%	38%	18%	15%	6%
Relevance of course to life after college	25%	34%	18%	14%	9%
Careers guidance	23%	34%	20%	16%	7%

Table 5.2—Levels of satisfaction with college experience in terms of a number of factors (Seaside, n=100)

Seaside (Private)	Highly satisfied	Fairly Satisfied	Unsure	Not very satisfied	Not at all satisfied
Physical surroundings, i.e. buildings, classrooms	57%	32%	5%	2%	4%
The standard of teaching/lecturing	32%	47%	13%	3%	5%
The amount of work set	12%	36%	17%	15%	20%
Course content	23%	42%	21%	9%	5%
Relevance of course to life after college	23%	36%	28%	7%	6%
Careers guidance	18%	42%	23%	8%	9%

5.2 Curriculum

This study investigates the vocational students' opinions on what they were learning in vocational colleges. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 above illustrate the students' level of satisfaction with their vocational college experiences in terms of various factors. As can be seen, 61% of Riverside students rated course content favourably (combining the percentages in the "highly satisfied" and "fairly satisfied" columns of Table 5.1), while 65% of Seaside students did likewise. More than one fifth of the student sample in Riverside expressed their dissatisfaction with content, whereas just one tenth did so in Seaside. This section explores three major themes concerning the curriculum in vocational colleges: the problem of

academicisation, the meaning of "vocational" for vocational students, and the dilemma faced by vocational colleges.

5.2.1 Academicisation

To acquire a better understanding of the curriculum in vocational programmes from the teachers' perspective, I interviewed Jia, the teacher of English reading in the Riverside business English programme. She explained to me how her class worked:

> Their textbooks are published by the Higher Education Press and are designed for academic students. I have a degree in English from an academic university and I still had a hard time understanding some of the vocabulary in the textbooks. There is no way these kids are going to understand this stuff. (Teacher Jia, Riverside)

This problem of academicisation, which makes vocational classes more academic and less focused on vocational training, was evident in different ways throughout the two colleges I visited. For example, when discussing class content, the students of Riverside pointed out that their curriculum was too theoretical and there was a limited connection between it and the actual work place:

> Cheng: […] We have too much textbook stuff. No hands-on practice at all. All the talking…they were saying if you worked in a company, you should do this and that. But how does a company function in reality? No one knows.
> Hai: Oh, we have practice. But it was just going to a travel agency for a while and doing a bit of research by ourselves. But that covers just a little bit of our course. Yes, we learn more theoretical things. (Cheng, Riverside)

At Riverside, programmes such as cost engineering are located on the satellite campus, where there are no practical training facilities. Therefore, highly technical material was taught mostly through theory, with limited access to labs and hands-on components. For example, Wei, a student of cost engineering complained:

> […] The teacher was doing all the explaining without any real objects. But I cannot imagine what the model looks like in my head only from his explanation. I need to see the real thing. (Wei, Riverside)

Wei also reported that his engineering survey class was incomprehensible to him at times and he could not 'understand a thing that the teacher was saying'. But he 'forced' himself 'to listen to the teacher' for he knew that he would not receive many engineering survey classes that term. In the same programme, Guanglu informed me of the content of his cost engineering class and the hands-on practical part of his programme:

> Guanglu: To be honest, I don't know what I am learning every day.
>
> Int: Why is that?
>
> Guanglu: There are lots of technical terms in the book which are very hard to understand. And we are covering a lot of things in this book, including many different kinds of machines, like excavators and lifts. We can just get a brief sense of what is what. We cannot even see the real machines, let alone operate them.
>
> Int: What about the practical part of your programme?
>
> Guanglu: We have hardly had any for the past two years. We are supposed to have some hands-on classes, but our teachers always told us there was no facility available and we needed to reschedule. But we never had any.
>
> Int: What kind of practical classes would you like to see?
>
> Guanglu: At least we need to see and learn how to use the equipment and machines, perhaps observe the engineering sites and see how they work.

One third of the student population at Riverside is based at the satellite campus, with no access to the equipment required for their programmes. Some students failed to see how the academic content of their curricula related to the world of work. In Seaside's English programme, for example, students spent their core class time studying highly academic essays:

> Qihan: We have to take this Advanced English class. It is a compulsory course. Oh…it is such a torture just sitting there.
>
> Int: Why is that?
>
> Qihan: I was just looking at my watch during this class, hoping time could pass faster. The teacher tried to explain those essays about globalisation or an aging society. I can only read half of the English words on each page. Could you tell me what is the point of doing this? Do I get to use any of these at work? Nothing. (Seaside)

The Riverside students reported a similar problem:

[…] I am actually looking forward to finishing my course because I could try something useful perhaps with more possibilities then. For the past two years, we haven't learned anything practical, but just dug into the books. I don't think this gives me any advantage when entering the workplace. I think we need to put in more effort by ourselves in order to compete with others.

However, not all classes are entirely irrelevant to the world of work. Seaside has been making an effort to emphasise its vocationalism by opening up at least four new practice-oriented courses each year, some of which the students found to be useful, as this extract shows:

Int: Do you think the classes you have been taking now are helpful for the workplace? Jinren: Some of them yes. I think the practical English writing class is very useful. They teach you how to write in English in the workplace, like formal emails or documentations. (Seaside)

Specialising in IT, Seaside has been giving great importance to developing its students' basic computer skills; indeed, the students spoke highly of the practicality of this training and the potential advantage it may bring when it comes to job hunting:

I think this training in using various kinds of office software is great. Some of my friends who are in even better colleges don't even use computers very often and still have no idea how to use PowerPoint to put up a slide. I think what we have here is an essential skill in any workplace. I may have a better chance of getting hired than others in this respect. (Jiahui)

Since our first year in college, we have had classes in those computer software and presentation skills. We learn how to use them for small projects and making presentations. I think they will be very useful when working in the office. (Xuhui, Seaside)

At Riverside, unlike the cost engineering programmes mentioned above, programmes such as chemical engineering, in which Riverside specialises, provides satisfactory, practically

oriented courses. Located on the main campus with access to the various training workshops and labs, the students enjoyed their classes in this programme:

> Zehua: We have training labs for us to do the practical components of the programme. We will have a whole morning or afternoon every week just for lab training.
>
> Guoshuai: Our teacher will show each of us how to do it in person. If I didn't do it well, he would point it out and correct me step by step.
>
> Int: What is the content of the lab training?
>
> Zehua: So far, we have learned how to use the lab tools and different equipment.

5.2.2 What does "vocational" mean to the students?

As can be seen from the above statement, students such as Qihan were overwhelmed by the academic content of the curriculum, and asked themselves what the point of it all was. However, other students were able to see the value of their classes in terms of providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills for work. This made me wonder whether the students knew what they were being trained for in the programme, and whether they were aware of its "vocational" value. As mentioned in the literature review (Section 2.2.1), "vocational education" in the Chinese context refers to the provision of the necessary vocational knowledge, skills, and professional ethics to enable students to engage in certain occupations (Ministry of Education, 2009). The present study aims to find out whether the students were aware of the purpose and nature of their programmes and to uncover what "vocational" means to them and what the relevance of their colleges were for vocational education.

Some of the students' comments highlighted the awkward functions of current Chinese vocational education, involving both vocational skills training and absorbing the CEE underperformers:

> Vocational education should be done from a young age to give people a sense for a particular occupation. It shouldn't be about studying for the CEE or any exams like that. (Guanglu)

However, students like Xiaoxin admitted to having a lack of knowledge about vocational education:

I don't know much about this term "vocational education" actually, especially after having been told to study for three years in high school. In this college, I haven't got a vocational awareness either. So, I don't know what to say about this.

It may seem surprising to learn that a vocational student does not know what to say about "vocational education". A possible explanation for this might be that the students were immersed in an academically-focused and test-driven education system for too long before they enrolled in vocational colleges. The colleges, however, sometimes failed to provide a "vocational" component that was effective enough to help these young people form a good understanding of the world of work and the vocational skills required to successfully prepare for employment. An intriguing group discussion among three Seaside students from the business English programme further illustrated this issue:

Int: Do you think your courses are vocational? Do you get a sense of a connection with the workplace?

Yuhan: No.

Junjie: Hey, but our textbooks are relevant to business, aren't they?

Yuhan: Are they?

Junjie: Yes of course. Business English.

Shanshan: But it's just a textbook, just business, it has nothing to do with a vocation or a real job.

Yuhan: Yes. Our business English only allows us to learn that. But no actual practice.

Junjie: But all the vocabulary we have learned could be used in business settings. That's very vocational, isn't it?

Shanshan: What if you were asked to do it in a real job? Could you really communicate effectively?

Yuhan: Yes, I agree. We just learn the words. Nothing more than that.

This interesting debate on the meaning of "vocational" and the relevance of their course content to work demonstrates how weak the connections are between vocational curricula and industry. The ambiguous purpose of the programmes and their potential inapplicability to the real world of work seems to prevent these perplexed and unsupported young people from forming an understanding of the skills required by real jobs and from developing a set of vocational aspirations from their learning experiences. This phenomenon further

illustrates the disconnect between the education system and the demands of the labour market in China, as well as the possible fragmented flows of learning and labour.

5.2.3 Dilemma

It is not hard for one to notice the paradox in Seaside's curriculum. Whilst, on the one hand, it seemed as if the students received an immense amount of academic and theoretical input, on the other hand, the college appeared to have invested resources in developing a number of new vocational courses. When talking about the matter of the curriculum, Ning, a member of the teaching staff at Seaside, pointed out the reason behind this paradox:

> I have been teaching here for 10 years. I have witnessed our college's attempts to be more vocational and practically oriented with its efforts to reform the curriculum. The plans and ideas are all perfect. However, we can never escape the compulsory curriculum set by the National Higher Education Bureau. We have to teach those courses that you can find in academic colleges. All we can do to make it vocational is to add more work-related classes to the compulsory set. I think it is absurd and even awkward in a way. (Teacher Ning, Seaside)

Ning's comments without a doubt reveal the 'awkward' place in which vocational colleges sit. As the highest stage of vocational education in China, vocational colleges are also a dependent part and the bottom level of higher education. The colleges are constrained by the top-down academically focused educational policy and curriculum, yet are still expected to produce vocational graduates.

5.3 Pedagogy

The previous section presented the students' opinions of *what* they were taught in their vocational programmes. This section sets out to illustrate their views on *how* they have been taught. It can be seen from Tables 5.1 and 5.2 that in terms of the standard of teaching at Riverside, 67% of the student sample expressed their satisfaction, compared with 79% at Seaside. Almost one in five students was not content with the standard of teaching at Riverside, while only 8% of the Seaside students sampled felt this way about their tuition. This section explores how the vocational students perceived the ways in which the course content was being delivered and the effectiveness of the pedagogy.

5.3.1 'Reading stuff from the book'

An in-depth examination of how the qualitative data converges with the quantitative data may shed some light on the reasons for the relatively low levels of satisfaction with the standard of teaching at Riverside. The factor that is most immediately apparent from the students' comments is the didactic and lecture-based way of teaching that characterised their classes, as it offered limited student participation and engagement. For example, Xiaoxin, in his second year of the cost engineering programme, stated in his questionnaire that he was 'not at all satisfied' with the standard of teaching. He commented on the way his teachers delivered their classes:

> When they teach, they just read stuff from the textbook…Literally, reading out loud for hours with no explanation whatsoever. They just read one word after another and don't seem to care what we are doing down there. (Xiaoxin, Riverside)

Others from the same programme as Xiaoxin's and four from the Business English programme also rated the teaching standard negatively and reported a similar problem in the interview/focus group sessions. In a focus group session, the students were asked to give reasons for the dissatisfaction they expressed in their questionnaires:

> Wenbo: What strikes me the most is our company management course. I feel that the teacher is just reading here and there from the book. It was so dry and boring.
> Yifan: Ahhh yes. It has been three months and I have no idea what that course is about. I never bother to listen to her at all. (Riverside)

5.3.2 Disengagement

The students continued to point out the problem of their lack of engagement with the lesson content and the ineffectiveness of the pedagogy:

> Shizhen: I didn't know what our English teacher was talking about in class. Sometimes, she went through the lesson so fast that I couldn't catch up.
> Yifan: But sometimes she was so slow, and she could talk for an hour and half about one passage in the book, which we had already read before. I think it was unnecessary and such a waste of our time.

Wenbo: That's right. It was unbearable to listen to something so boring for almost two hours. She doesn't seem to know which level we are in, going fast and slow as she pleases. (Riverside)

What is most immediately apparent is the distance and discoordination between teaching and learning. Xiaoxin also underlined this distance and also the indifference he perceived in his teacher's teaching:

[…] He is just up there [teaching]. I feel that he may think whatever you do down there is none of my business. I will just mind my own business [teaching] and you can do whatever you want, which doesn't concern me. If you want to study, then listen and study. If you aren't bothered, then don't. (Riverside)

In Seaside's classrooms, too, it seems that there is a lack of student engagement, but in a different way. Yuehan shared with me her classroom experiences:

Yuehan: I feel like the teaching pace is completely based on the good students' learning progress. You know, those students who are very good at this in the beginning. [The teachers] don't care much about people like me who have a rather poor knowledge of it. In class, they may think if Haibo [one of "the good students"] understands it, everyone must get it. And they just continue their teaching. But the majority of our classmates are not that good. For example, I sat with these girls in class. One of them is better than the rest of us. She can keep up with the pace. But sometimes even she couldn't understand what the teacher was saying, let alone me. I am always struggling to catch up.
Int: Did you ask any questions or seek help from the teachers?
Yuehan: I have this feeling that everyone else understands the lessons perfectly. I know that's not true. But I still feel that it's just me, my problem. Every time I started struggling, I found myself falling behind and couldn't catch up. (Yuehan, Seaside)

Yuehan's struggles were fairly common among the vocational students. Xuhui, a first-year student, spoke about her roommates:

They told me they didn't have the brains for classes like this and can barely learn anything. They told me they just wanted to get by for four years and get school over with. (Xuhui, Seaside)

5.4 Assessment

The previous two sections provide evidence of the students' perspectives on what and how they were taught in vocational programmes. This section will uncover how they think they are evaluated and their perceptions of teacher expectations. All levels of pre-secondary schooling in China are exam-driven, from primary school to the notorious final CEE. But once students have entered vocational colleges, apparently exams seem to be largely irrelevant.

5.4.1 'Pass with no problem at all'

At Seaside, the students expressed their dissatisfaction and confusion regarding the assessment and exams of their courses. It seems that the teachers failed to make clear the specifics of their grading system and what they expect from the students.

> There is not much difference in the grades between you and me, even though I put in much more effort than you did. You cannot tell the difference. In the end, everyone passes. I think our teachers just set the bar too low. (Jiren, Seaside)

> They never tell you why you got this grade, what is good and what needs to improve. There is only a grade saying that you passed. (Bo, Seaside)

At Riverside, Xiaoxin and Guanglu described how they prepared for their exams and how their courses were evaluated:

> I never worry about the finals. [The teacher] will always give you some questions beforehand, which are basically the exam questions. If you listen and take a photo of those questions, perhaps memorise them before the exam, and also manage to attend half of the classes, then you will pass with no problem at all. The assessment is always easy. Even if you didn't manage to pass at the first try, you can always take them a second time with the same exam questions. And the teacher will turn a blind eye the second time. As long as you fill in all the blanks on the exam paper, you will pass. (Xiaoxin, Riverside)

Sometimes I would bring my cheat sheets to the exams if I didn't memorise the questions they gave. Some of my classmates don't even bother to cheat. They don't take this seriously and they even never show up on exam days because they know they would pass eventually anyway. (Guanglu, Riverside)

As can be seen from the above statements, the lack of a proper assessment system in vocational colleges might be one of the reasons the students are unconcerned about their performance or 'never worry'; they are less motivated to invest effort in their studies. They can always 'pass with no problem at all' because their teachers would give them the exam questions beforehand or 'turn a blind eye' at the re-sit exam. In their words, their teachers seem to have made things easy for the students. I was interested, therefore, to learn how the students perceived the teachers' expectations of them.

5.4.2 Teachers' expectations

I asked the students what, in their opinion, their teachers expected from them. At Riverside, a group of first-year business English students shared their views:

> Shizhen: In some other colleges, passing CET-4 and 6 [College English Test Level 4 and 6] are very common among the students. But for our college, it seems like a huge requirement for us. Our teachers said, 'Well, for you, you can work hard and try, but you won't pass CET-6 unless you are very lucky.'
> Int: What do you think your teachers' expectations are for you?
> Yifan: Not so high I guess. They would be very thrilled if just one of us passed CET-6. I just don't feel like studying for it when I hear them talk like that. (Riverside)

It seems that their teachers' attitudes have, to a certain extent, discouraged the students from pursuing the higher-level certificate. Other students, however, sensed an even lower expectation from their teachers when considering how they react to misbehaviour in the classroom:

> Guanglu: They [the teachers] indulge us too much. If no one pays attention and just played all the time in class, they would just let us be to do whatever we want. They just carry on teaching like nothing happened. I think this is too much. I guess they just

don't have such high hopes for us. As long as we are kept in school safe and sound, it is fine. (Riverside)

It seems that the reason for Guanglu referring to them being 'indulged' is that contrary to the popular stereotype of vocational youth, i.e. that they are naturally poorly behaved underachievers, in fact, they wished to perform well in class, to be disciplined by their teachers, and expected by them to achieve better. However, the exam system apparently influenced the teachers' perceptions and interactions with the students. Consequently, the teachers 'just carry on teaching like nothing happened' and never 'have high hopes' for their students. The perspectives of the teachers will be further investigated in Chapter 7.

5.5 'Passing time'

When facing an academicised curricula, a disengaging form of pedagogy, assessment that they do not need to 'worry' about, and teachers who 'never have high hopes' for them, these students had to adopt various ways to 'pass time':

> Int: What do you do when you cannot understand the teachers?
> Guanglu: I will be giving up and sleeping it off maybe, playing with phones or laptops, just passing time really. I play with my phones too much, during class, breaks, and back in the dorm.
> Xiaoxin: Sometimes you just want to skip classes and go to an internet café to play online games with friends.
> Guanglu: It [class time] can be used to chat with my girlfriend, to develop our relationship. (Riverside)

In his class, Wei admitted that he was one of the minority who 'forced' themselves to listen to the teacher:

> We have 60 students in our programme. Only 40 attended the class that day. Those attending the class were just sleeping it off, playing with phones, or watching movies. (Wei, Riverside)

Phones appeared to be the major source of entertainment for the students in class time. Yuehan disclosed what happened when their phones were taken away:

Yuehan: There was a time when the college managers were inspecting the classes. They had to ban all phones in class. It was funny to sit in a class during that time. [Laugh] Everyone was like staring at the teacher in a daze or playing with their fingers because there was no phone to play with. (Seaside)

Yuehan described an interesting picture of her class. Her classmates were 'staring at the teacher in a daze' and 'playing with their fingers' when they could not find anything else to play with. As mentioned in Section 4.7, a considerable percentage of the students entered their programmes with a low level of interest or preparation. They might have been further disaffected by the above-mentioned problems within the college. Perhaps, having an attitude of trying to 'get by' or sleeping in class seems to be a fairly reasonable and understandable response to the ways the curriculum and pedagogy are structured. The vocational students' 'passing time' could be a result of their unproductive learning experiences.

5.6 Support from the colleges

In order to make sure the students felt supported and assisted throughout their college years, vocational colleges would provide various elements of support, both direct and indirect, academically and pastorally, to help them in their daily college lives or their future careers guidance. This section presents the findings concerning the students' opinions about the accessibility and helpfulness of the staff, as well as the careers guidance they obtained from their colleges.

5.6.1 Getting help from the staff

At Seaside, almost all the students I encountered gave positive comments about the advice given, with frequent references to the approachability and helpfulness of staff who had a genuine interest in the students. A group of third-year students were talking about how their teachers had helped them for the past few years:

Yuehan: Many of our teachers were just wonderful. I remember one of them helped me a lot in my first year because I was a bit slow. She would reach out to me for a chat and ask how I was doing from time to time. And sometimes she would say something encouraging before the finals.

Jiahui: Yes. For the past two years, I have noticed every teacher we had was always willing to help. They will sit down with me and talk when I feel down. And I can turn to them whenever I feel I need to. (Seaside)

At Riverside (the public college), however, it was a completely different story. The students complained about the disconnect with and distance from the staff (academic teachers and student support counsellors). I conducted a focus group session with four first-year students in this respect who seemed to have particular need for the support of the staff during their transitional period:

> Int: Do you feel supported when adjusting to your new college life?
>
> Yifan and Wenbo: No, not really.
>
> Yifan: I cannot even see any of my teachers really. Don't see them. And don't know where to find them.
>
> Wenbo: The counsellors come to inspect the dorm rooms. That's about it. And we just see our teachers once a week in class.
>
> Int: What if you had any problems or questions, who you would turn to then?
>
> Wenbo: We are pretty much on our own most of the time.
>
> Yifan: Yes. You cannot even find them. They show up when the bell rings and just race out of the classroom the moment the class finishes. And you don't get to see them outside the classroom.
>
> Int: What about the counsellors? Aren't they supposed to help you?
>
> Julan: She is managing so many different programmes. So, she is very busy. She has only had two meetings with us so far. That is about it really. I don't know where they are. (Riverside)

Guanglu, a second-year student, revealed what he thought might be the reason for some of the teachers' disinterest in the lives of their students:

> Guanglu: This college got so many contract teachers to teach us. They have no responsibility for the students whatsoever. Their only job is to teach. Nothing else. So, they just go after they are done teaching. (Riverside)

In the public colleges, teachers were hired on two different kinds of contracts: permanent and temporary, a distinction the teachers and students mentioned multiple times in their conversations. All of the colleges' administrators, counsellors, and teachers of basic classes (Chinese, maths, English, etc.) held permanent positions and received a bundle of "socialist-

era-type" benefits[7] from the college and the city. In contrast, the contract teachers, who formed a remarkably high percentage of the teaching staff, were hired from outside and were paid an hourly wage. They were staff from academic universities or experienced engineers, teaching part-time on one of the college's specialised vocational courses. For many of these teachers, teaching was merely a source of income, rather than a moral obligation, and they did not feel a sense of loyalty to the students or the college. Time spent engaging with students outside class may have been considered time wasted, which might explain why they would often 'race out' of the classroom when their hours were completed and the students 'cannot even see them' or 'don't know where to find them'.

5.6.2 Careers guidance

Table 5.3—Which of the following have you experienced at the college?

	Riverside (Public)		Seaside (Private)	
	YES (please briefly evaluate your experience)	NO	YES (please briefly evaluate your experience)	NO
Detailed advice on post-college options	12%	88%	13%	87%
Detailed careers advice sessions	19%	81%	21%	79%
Individual careers interviews	7%	93%	4%	96%
Hands-on work experience	9%	91%	6%	94%

The following section deals with the careers guidance provided at the vocational colleges. This sets the scene for the data analysis of the students' future prospects in the next chapter. The questionnaire sample groups were asked what types of careers advice they had been offered at college and how they evaluated these types of advice. It can be seen from Table 5.3 that only between 4 and 21% of the sample had received these careers assistances. Those who had received these types of help frequently commented that the above sessions were 'too crowded and impersonal', 'too general' or 'not very useful for them'. The statistics demonstrate a severe lack of proper and systematic careers support in both of the colleges.

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[7] The permanent teachers' benefits may include free lunches, gifts of cooking oil and rice on major holidays, housing benefits, and pension.

When asked about the careers advice they received at the college, the Riverside respondents complained about the absence of college careers services:

> Int: Is there anyone in the college who can offer you careers advice?
>
> Xiaoxin: No, not really. That's not our counsellor's job, nor our teacher's. Our counsellor's job is to make sure these kids [the students] are not getting in any trouble. So, they can return the kids [to the parents] with no problem. I don't think we should go to him for careers advice and frankly I don't know who I can go to for that. (Riverside)

Yifan also pointed out the incompetency and unresponsiveness of the staff in giving careers guidance:

> Yifan: I wanted to ask my teacher about the top-up exams we can take to upgrade our degree. There are so many companies out there offering top-up courses. I wished someone could offer me some suggestions on this whole thing. So, I went to one of our teachers. She just told me she didn't know much about it and asked me to go to our home teacher or counsellor. But when I went to them, they said the exact same thing. I even left them several messages weeks ago. But none of them even bother to reply. (Riverside)

At Seaside, Xiu commented about her experiences of the careers guidance lectures the college organised:

> I don't think those lectures are that practical. They just lay out all the data about the employment rate or trends or what types of jobs the students are getting in our province. But not everyone is the same as the trend in the data. They provide very limited options for us to explore or think about. What about the other possibilities? What about the things I am interested in? I would like to have a more diverse and clearer setting-out of options for me. (Seaside)

The college also arranged a series of job fairs for final-year students, with company presentations and events. However, Rong explained how the situation could be improved and how the students would benefit more from such events:

Rong: I think in-depth contact with the employer would be better than just company intros and leaflets, especially at an earlier stage. We would have some knowledge of a company's working environment, work content, work load, et cetera. Hence, there would be a clearer picture of employment choices beforehand and also some time to think about those choices. We only got a job fair in the final year and the companies never reveal anything detailed or specific in their presentations. It's hard for us to set a clear goal. (Seaside)

What is fairly evident is that the students lacked support and required careers advice from the staff and greater assistance in the form of a more individualised and detailed layout of options or more informed and employer-oriented information to help them choose a job.

5.7 Internship experiences

Vocational students are expected to undertake internships at the end of their programmes. For the colleges I investigated, the duration of internship varies from 3 months to 6 months. Those preparing for top-up exams could be exempted from undertaking internships. I was curious about what their internship experiences were like, what kind of knowledge and skills they acquired from their internships, and what they would have to say about their courses when looking back on the whole programme as someone who already had a taste of the real workplace. Four internship students from Seaside's business English programme were interviewed, two of whom had successfully navigated an extremely selective interviewing process to gain their internship positions at a financial management company, where they were very satisfied with their learning experience. However, the other two students expressed a lower level of satisfaction with their internships, although the interviewing process for their jobs had not been as competitive.

5.7.1 Internship content

The students spoke of the detailed tasks they were asked to do during their internships. The two participants who had worked at the financial management company, Qinqiang and Rong, had been in charge of processing and accessing orders from customers, which required a knowledge of finance and of stock or fund operations. However, Xiu, working as a purchasing intern at an export company, had been assigned basic support tasks in the office, which were not directly relevant to the company's core business. Yujie had worked at a call centre for a business service company. Her daily duties included answering phone calls and

taking complaints from customers or local retailers, which, according to Yujie, were not very relevant to her field of study.

5.7.2 Internship as a learning experience

The four students were asked about the skills and knowledge they required during their internships and were invited to comment on them as learning experiences. Rong, working as a member of the order-processing team, benefited remarkably from her internship experience:

> The internship provides me an opportunity to learn more about finance. It really expands my knowledge beyond my field of study. This could open more doors for me in the future. Apart from knowledge, what I also learned from my team members and my mentors are their work ethics and attitude. Their attention to details, risk awareness, and sense of responsibility always impresses me because you always need to be very careful when working in finance. I also learned how to socialise at the workplace, which is so different from things in college. My mentors and team supervisors have always been so kind to me. They check in on me from time to time, making sure I am happy there. Everybody in the team is very nice to me and treats me as a real team member. They take care of me, teach me, and really want me to learn stuff. I am very grateful for their help. (Seaside)

Qinqing shared similar experiences to Rong. They were both valued by their company and strived to keep up their performance levels in order to be hired permanently. Xiu, however, decided to leave her job as a purchasing assistant as soon as her internship contract ended. She expressed her dissatisfaction with the internship:

> At first, I got this mentor showing me all the routines and processes. I think what they asked me to do was always the most basic stuff, like looking up data or scanning or photocopying. They never let me touch their core purchasing business. I know the core is how to negotiate with the suppliers. They never introduced any of that to me. Their attitude towards me is that the job of an intern is simply to support them. And they can just dump whatever work they don't feel like doing on me. For three months, I never had a sense belonging and I was merely an intern there in the office, even without a cubical to work in. I guess the reason they hired and trained me was to get maximum profit and office support at the lowest cost. Even my mentor was never really teaching or helping me; it was rather a way of making me serve them better. (Seaside)

Like Xiu's mundane and monotonous tasks in her internship, Yujie's call centre job was also not particularly interesting or educational. She also had a sense of being used as "cheap labour":

> I cannot get anything out of it [the internship] really. I feel like what I am doing has nothing to do with what I have learned. I just sit there, answering phone calls, day in and day out. Many customers are in a very bad mood. I have to take all their swearing or yelling. This company has a huge staff turnover for this kind job. They are mostly interns. Lots of them are taken in and after three months, the next batch of interns come in to do the same thing. Interns come and go and get the lowest pay. The company does it every year. (Seaside)

It is apparent that the quality of these internships varies significantly. While there were rewarding, valuable and educational experiences to be had, there were also exploitative and unfulfilling experiences. However, I noted that the former kind of internship opportunities were highly competitive (only two positions for over 80 applicants), while the latter internship places were relatively accessible for most of the students. Therefore, the final-year students faced an immense amount of pressure when competing with each other for quality internship opportunities. Students are most likely ending up in "cheap labour" internship positions, which lack a clear educational purpose with only simple tasks to perform.

5.7.3 From classroom to workplace

The students were asked for their opinions of their college courses in terms of how connected and relevant they were to their internships. Specifically they were asked what kind of knowledge or skills that they developed from the courses they considered useful at work, and whether they noticed any gaps between what is learned in class and what is needed in the workplace.

Qinqiang talked about how he found some courses had prepared him to carry out his internship tasks, especially one of the practice-oriented courses developed at Seaside:

> Qinqiang: I think the most helpful courses are business English writing and translation because I communicate with our overseas customers almost every day about their

orders. Everything has to be in English and formatted in a business style. [The courses] helped me write and communicate properly. (Seaside)

In contrast with the negative comments students had previously expressed about the academicised curriculum, Qinqiang saw the two courses he mentioned as being very useful and relevant to his current job. Furthermore, both Qinqiang and Xiu mentioned that they had benefitted from the presentation skills they had learned at the college:

Xiu: The teachers gave us lots of presentation opportunities and trained us in the skills needed to speak in public. Now we are required to do team progress presentations every Monday morning. I feel comfortable and confident doing that as I did it many times in class before. I appreciate all those necessary skills and the ways of expressing myself that I learned from the classes. (Seaside)

However, Rong observed a distance between the skills training at college and skill demand at work:

Rong: I feel like even with all those vocationally oriented courses, the whole programme is still very exam-oriented. For us, you need to pass stuff like TEM-4 [test for English majors], which focuses on writing and reading skills. But here, at work, we need people who have the ability to effectively communicate in English, which is the very skill that the college failed to train us in. For example, my colleague here, who never passed any exams, is highly capable of negotiating logically and clearly in English with overseas colleagues and customers. They [the programme] never taught how to effectively put words into actual use and we lacked training in communication and negotiation skills. (Seaside)

Rong's observation about her job demonstrates that qualifications do not necessarily reflect possession of the actual skills required to carry out a job. There is a lack of skills-based industry-driven occupational standards and a qualifications framework which provides connections to skill performance at the workplace.

5.8 Comparing the two colleges

This section compares the findings in this chapter collected from Seaside (privately funded) and Riverside (publicly funded). Generally speaking, the privately funded college enjoyed

more favourable ratings than the publicly funded one in almost all aspects of the students' learning experiences, especially in terms of the course content, physical surroundings, and the standard of teaching (see Tables 5.1 and 5.2). As for the curriculum, despite there being more students (+4%) rating it favourably at Seaside, the academicisation of the curriculum and disconnect with the workplace were apparent in both of the colleges. In terms of pedagogy, more negative ratings and comments were received from the publicly funded college (See Tables 5.1, 5.2 and Section 5.2). Moreover, the students at the publicly funded college reported receiving less support and help and experiencing a greater distance from the staff compared to their privately funded counterparts (see Sections 5.2.2 and 5.5.1). However, the issues of student disengagement in the classroom, the lack of proper assessment, as well as the absence of adequate careers guidance were observed at both colleges. As a result, the students at both colleges adopted a 'passing time' attitude in their classrooms.

5.9 Summary

The findings in this chapter shed light on the students' experiences in vocational colleges. It is apparent that some students were in vocational programmes with academicised curricula that had weak connections to the world of work. The didactic and disengaging teaching methods and the lack of a proper assessment system rendered the students less motivated and less interested in their studies. Some students perceived that the teaching staff may not 'have high hopes' for them and might tend to 'indulge' their misbehaviour in the classroom. As a response to the dissatisfactory learning experience, the students came up with various way of 'passing time' to 'get by'. In terms of support, the students at the private Seaside College felt supported and found the staff accessible and helpful, and had their interests at heart; while students at the public college reported their teachers' disinterest in the lives of their students and that they did 'not know where to find them [the teachers]'. Students at both colleges felt a lack of support in terms of careers advice and guidance. As for their internship experiences, the quality varied greatly. Some of the students were valued and supported by the company they worked for and really benefited from their internship experience in terms of learning skills and work ethics. Others, however, were made to perform repetitive and monotonous tasks which were irrelevant to their area of study.

5.10 Discussion

This chapter has provided evidence to address Research Question 2. It has highlighted what vocational college was like for young people as well as their perceptions on the relevance of

their programmes to the world of work. The discussion of the findings of this chapter will be informed by the Marxist political economy perspective as well as by the relevant literature on vocational education and skills formation (A further in-depth discussion is on Chapter 8). The theory-based and academicised curricula provided by the vocational colleges demonstrate a huge disconnect between the vocational education system and employers, as well as 'the fragmented flows of learning and labour' (Buchanan et al., 2010; Stewart, 2016). The academicised curricula, the disengaging pedagogy and the forms of assessment created a 'vacuum' at the centre of the student's learning experiences (Woronov, 2015, p. 79). The students' inattention in class was a 'less oppositional and more rational' response to their learning experience (Woronov, 2015). They were being trained as 'alienated labour' (Bowles and Gintis, 2011). After completing their vocational programmes, they might find themselves providing 'a supply of inexpensive and unskilled labour for an export-driven economy' (Koo, 2016). The next chapter will explore these students' perspectives of the job market and their future careers possibilities.

Chapter 6 Findings—THE FUTURE: *exploring the job market and making plans*

6.1 Introduction

In neoliberal countries, young people now see their decision-making as individual 'choice' rather than the product of structured constraints (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). Their choices and life decisions are made so as to build an 'enterprising self', i.e. 'a calculating self, a self that calculates about itself and works upon itself in order to better itself' (Rosa, 1992, p. 146); yet structural forces continue to shape or 'pattern' young people's life chances (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, p. 8; Ball et al., 2000). In her study (2015, p.114), Woronov found that vocational colleges had sold their programmes to students by promising to turn them into desirable commodities in the job market. Three or four years later (depending on the programme), vocational students would be negotiating on an individual level in an unpredictable and risky labour market. Employment opportunities and labour market requirements are communicated to young people as they form their perceptions of what is possible, desirable or appropriate (Hodkinson et al., 1996; Dalziel, 2015). This chapter brings together some of the quantitative and qualitative data to examine the students' perceptions of the job market and their future career possibilities. How marketable do they think they are? What are their perceived levels of skills readiness and employability? And, what kind of career plans do they have for now?

The students shared their perspectives of their future job possibilities. In the questionnaire, a related question asked respondents to rate their outlook in terms of their employment prospects (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1—What is your attitude to your employment prospects after finishing college?

	Riverside (Public)		Seaside (Private)	
	Percentage		Percentage	
Very optimistic		21%		8%
Somewhat optimistic		38%		32%
Neutral		23%		43%
Somewhat pessimistic		13%		13%
Very pessimistic		5%		4%
Total	100		100	

In the publicly funded Riverside, 59% ("very optimistic" and "somewhat optimistic") of the respondents were optimists about their employment prospects, while 40% ("very optimistic" and "somewhat optimistic") of the privately funded Seaside students felt the same way. Almost one in five students at each of the colleges appeared to see themselves as having a somewhat bleak future in the job market. The responses from the interviews and focus groups provide insights into the reasons for their questionnaire responses.

6.2 The ceiling effect?

In the focus group sessions, I asked the students who had rated their views as being "somewhat pessimistic" and "very pessimistic" in the questionnaire, their reasons for doing so:

> Int: Why do you think it is unlikely that you could find a suitable job?
> Hai: This vocational degree is not good enough.
> Hongyu: Yes, they always prefer people with academic degrees.
> Hai: I was wandering around in this job fair. There was academic, academic, academic and academic. Every company requires an academic degree. So, for me, a vocational student, there was nothing.
> Annan: My friend who is graduating told me that there *were* jobs out there. But none of them really interested her. She wanted to do something in media. But she can never get anything because they have higher requirements. It was really tough for her.
> Int: What kind of higher requirements?
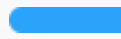
Annan: It's the degree. We [vocational graduates] do not meet their requirements. We can only pick the jobs that are available for us, even if we hate them. (Riverside)

The above students directly or indirectly witnessed the constrained career options open to vocational students, which contributed to their pessimistic views of their future job possibilities. As Annan indicated in the above statement, they felt it is likely that their preferred jobs would require applicants with academic degrees, leaving those with vocational degrees no choice but to accept the jobs in which they may be less interested, just because they are available. In her research on migrant vocational students in China, Ling used the term 'ceiling effect' to describe the constraints and marginalisation migrant students were facing due to their rural *hukou* (household status) (Ling, 2015, p. 111). In my study, it is apparent that this hierarchical degree-based ceiling effect plays a significant role in how vocational students form their aspirations. In fact, approximately half of the respondents in the questionnaire believed that it would be more difficult to find employment with a vocational degree compared to students with an academic degree (see Table 6.2). It was very rare to find students at either college who thought having a vocational degree would make job hunting easier for them (only 6% and 7%).

Table 6.2—In your opinion, is it more difficult or less difficult to find employment with a vocationally focused degree compared to students with academic degrees?

	Riverside (Public)		Seaside (Private)	
	Percentage		Percentage	
More difficult		53%		50%
About the same/average		32%		40%
Less difficult		6%		7%
Hard to say, please share your view		9%		3%
Total	100		100	

A significant number of students described the degree as 'a stepping stone to certain jobs', functioning as a way of differentiation and classification:

Tao: My uncle is in charge of hiring people at a governmental institution. He said the way they work is that they put first-tier university graduates on one side, second-tier on the other, and put vocational graduates at the bottom. If the institution is in need of

15 new employees, they would go straight to the first and the second tiers. The situation is just like this. That's why my dad and uncle were not on board with me coming here. They all wanted me to redo the test next year to get a better degree. (Seaside)

In Riverside, similar views were expressed:

Zehua: Everybody is saying that a degree is kind of like a stepping stone to the world of work. A vocational degree means not a lot of doors are open for us, or not many "good doors", while having an academic degree will open more and better doors.

Guanglu: The first thing they [the employers] will look at is your degree. It's no good if you have all the capabilities for the job but no degree. If you don't have the degree they ask for, you won't even get through the first round of selection. We are certainly at a disadvantage in this respect as there are people with academic degrees waiting to be recruited.

Tengteng: If a vocational graduate and an academic graduate both went for a job as an engineer, they [the employers] must prefer the academic one first even without seeing them in person. It doesn't matter how good your engineering skills are. This [an academic degree] is what they want after all. (Riverside)

Their teachers were also concerned about their students' disadvantaged position in the job market. Lianshuang, a teacher at Seaside, commented:

Some of my students did not get through their interviews because they hold vocational degrees. It shows the public's attitude towards them. There is nothing they can do about it. If their degrees are not good enough, they will get many doors shut in their faces when they try to get a job. They need more patience than academic students in terms of finding employment. (Seaside)

The above statements and opinions articulated by the students may have been formed by receiving second-hand information (e.g. from family members, teachers, peers, or senior students). Some however, reported that they had personally experienced being treated differently when competing with academic students:

Qihan: I was going in for an interview for this volunteer position in Dalian. Everyone had their forms ready for the recruiter to review. When they were looking through the forms one by one, I could tell that they hardly looked at mine and just casually put it in the pile. I was told to go back and wait. When they went through other people's forms, they were very thorough, asking them questions. It was a totally different attitude. I know it's because the name of my college on that form indicates a lower level of degree compared to others. This is only a tiny interview for a college volunteer position. I can imagine the situation will be worse if it's an interview for a big company. Our files won't even be looked at if there are candidates from better colleges. (Seaside)

Their experiences may have constructed these students' pessimistic perceptions that they would not be considered favourably in the job market. Xiu told me that an academic degree not only matters when it comes to finding a job, it is also essential for further career development:

Xiu: I think an academic degree is important if you want to get promotion or career development. I was in an interview for a major insurance company. If you want to move up to management, you must have an academic degree. Vocational graduates cannot develop to that path. They can only do sales and that's it. (Seaside)

6.3 "Down to the individual" or "other factors"?

6.3.1 Individual competency

Some students offered a counterpoint to the seemingly undesirable position that vocational graduates have in the job market, as perceived by the students above. They believed that individual capability or personal competence is more important than the degree when it comes to finding a job:

Int: Do you think being treated differently for having a vocational degree could be a barrier in your job hunting?

Jiren: I think it is a problem. But I don't see that the degree matters that much. I will try my best to show them [the employers] my skills and capabilities, show them I am up for it. I think if I put in enough effort and find the right methods, I will achieve my career goals and find the job I want. (Seaside)

Tai: I think they [the employers] cannot see everything about you just based on your degree. That [the degree] is just a way of selection. I don't think the companies would decide everything just by that. I think they would like to see more work experience or personal accomplishments. Some academic graduates may have fewer achievements over the years than us. (Riverside)

Jia: I think a wise employer will always find employees who are capable of doing the job. The employer will test one's capabilities. There are people with degrees from top universities who cannot perform well at their jobs. So, a wise employer certainly won't only hire people for their degrees. I don't think it [the degree] is an issue. (Seaside)

Rong, who was interning at a financial management company (see previous chapter), was working alongside academic graduates. She shared her view of this issue:

I don't have the feeling that I have been treated differently there, because your degree or your college is one thing, and you and what you are capable of is another thing. They are totally different. You cannot completely shut someone out for having a vocational degree. (Seaside)

As can be seen from the above, those who did not think their vocational degree would be a barrier to obtaining employment emphasised individual effort and a personal portfolio of achievements, which, in their view, were unrelated to the status of their degrees.

The above students were among the 12 who added their own comments when responding to Question 27: 'Is it more difficult or less difficult to find employment with a vocationally focused degree compared to students with academic degrees?' (see Table 6.2). The phrases found among these comments were of the type: 'up to individual competence', 'the degrees do not matter if you are capable of doing the job', and 'the chances are all down to ourselves'. What is evident from both sources of data is the emphasis on individuality and the phenomenon of individualisation. The students had developed the conception that individuals are essentially responsible for their own capacities and achievements.

One item in the questionnaire that was particularly relevant to the above issue is: "To what extent do you think success in finding a job depends upon the individual?" The responses to this question are presented in Table 6.3 below.

Table 6.3—To what extent do you think success in finding a job depends upon the individual?

	Riverside (Public)	Seaside (Private)
	Percentage	Percentage
It is very much down to the individual	43%	51%
It depends on both the individual and other factors, such as family background	42%	44%
It mainly depends on other factors, such as family background	15%	5%

It can be seen that in Riverside, the percentage of students who felt that finding a job was "very much down to the individual" is almost equivalent to those who believed "it depends on both the individual and other factors" (43% and 42% respectively). 15% of them thought it mainly depends on other factors. In Seaside, over half of the respondents indicated that they felt obtaining employment was very much affected by individual factors. 44% of the respondents deemed it to be a joint effect of the individual and other factors. Only a few students (5%) considered it was mainly down to other factors.

The previous quotes emphasising individualism and self-achievement shed light on why the respondents in each of the two colleges took the view that individual factors are paramount. Those who considered that "other factors" contributed to success in finding a job (respondents who selected "it depends on both the individual and other factors" and "it mainly depends on other factors") were invited to select three external factors they thought were important (see Table 6.4 below).

Table 6.4—Please select three factors you think are the most important in affecting your success in finding a job

	Riverside (public)	Seaside (private)
	Percentage	Percentage
Family background	47.37%	46.94%
Family and personal connections	77.19%	75.51%
Gender	10.53%	10.2%
Government policy	38.6%	30.61%
Job opportunities in the region	68.42%	77.55%
The cost of living in the region	29.82%	18.37%
Employers' attitude to employing young people	24.56%	22.45%
Other factors (Please specify)	3.51%	18.37%
Total	100	100

As can be seen from the above table, the three factors that were most frequently selected by the students were: "family and personal connections" (77.19% at Riverside; 75.51% at Seaside); "job opportunities in the region" (68.42% at Riverside; 77.55% at Seaside); and "family background" (47.37% at Riverside; 46.94% at Seaside). The qualitative data provides evidence on why students in these two colleges took this view and how they formed their opinions regarding the factors influencing their employment prospects in the absence of sufficient experience of the job market.

6.3.2 Family connections (*guanxi*)

More than three-quarters of the students responding to the question believed family and personal connections represented an important factor affecting their success in finding a job. In the focus group sessions and individual interviews, both the students and the teachers told me that, in many cases, degree types, training and skills were less relevant than having strong family connections (*guanxi*), as many students would gain jobs or internship opportunities through family arrangements:

Int: Why do you think family connections (*guanxi*) are an important factor here?

Gong: I think if you had really strong *guanxi*, jobs like civil servants or working in the public sector would be so much easier to access. Many people I know just went ahead and got hired comfortably with no worries at all. Other things like degrees, qualifications, or personal capabilities would not matter that much. They would always have jobs regardless of whether or not they have all these things. But those would matter if you do not have any *guanxi* because you will be on your own and you need those to compete with others. (Seaside)

Guanglu shared how his fellow-villagers (*laoxiang*) find jobs in big cities:

Guanglu: Some of my fellow-villagers who I knew since childhood landed jobs in Beijing through their fathers' connections. Others work in a car body shop in Tianjin owned by a senior man in our village. They knew this fellow through their parents. He pays good money. I feel like you always need to rely on family connections as it's very hard to build up anything useful by yourself. It is easier to access any vacancies via those connections. (Riverside)

Regarding the issue of family connections (*guanxi*), Linshuang (a teacher) agreed with the students, commenting:

It will be very difficult for them to find a suitable job based on their qualifications and skills. Nowadays, many students rely on their *guanxi* to obtain jobs. Many parents are willing to get involved in this, helping their children [to find jobs]. For me, if they [the students] have these kinds of resources, they should definitely take advantage of them. Why not? (Seaside)

As can be seen from the above comments, the students perceived that family and personal connections could potentially exceed qualifications or skills as the most important factor in securing a job. This perception could possibly lead to these young people having a hard time articulating their own aspirations or making career plans. This will be illustrated further in Section 6.4.

6.3.3 Job opportunities in the region

The questionnaire results (see Table 6.4) indicate that job opportunities in the region were also frequently selected as an important factor in addition to family connections. Vocational students, especially those from less developed provinces and rural areas, consider their job prospects in cities like Tianjin or Dalian, as well as in their home regions. For example, Yujie, having been interning at a call centre for a few months by this point, compared jobs in her hometown, Luoyang, located in one of China's central regions, with those in Dalian:

> I thought about going back to Luoyang. But ever since I started my internship, I realised how different Dalian is—always developing, more and more opportunities. There are so many companies like where I am working here at the Software Park. But we do not have any of that back home, only heavy industry jobs. So now I am a bit hesitant. (Seaside)

Guanglu also shared his views about job-seeking in different regions:

> If I choose to work here in Tianjin, I do not think I would have a good life as the salary may be too low to live in this city. I am from a village in Hebei province and there are no decent jobs around my village. But there will be a new state-level development area in Xiong'an, which is not far from home. It will be a great idea to try there as there will be many new companies moving into Xiong'an. (Riverside)

Rather than obtaining help from individual families, young people such as Guanglu thought that job opportunities could be generated as a result of state planning. The students calculated their positions in different regional job markets and formed their perceptions of their employment prospects via their different types of exposure to the job market information. (The issue of low salary vs. high living expense will be revisited.)

6.4 Skills preparation and job readiness

When discussing which factors influenced their prospects of obtaining suitable employment, some students (43% at Riverside and 51% at Seaside) appeared to be devout believers in individual competency and self-achievement, while others (57% at Riverside and 49% at Seaside) were concerned about certain external factors, like the possible ceiling effect that their "inferior degree" brought for them or the *guanxi* resources they may or may not have. In addition to considering these perceived influencing factors, it is also vitally important to

investigate to what extent the students were prepared for their future jobs and how confident they felt about joining the workforce. In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked how well equipped they thought they were for the world of work in terms of various skills (see Table 6.5). What can be seen immediately is that, in general, the students from the publicly funded Riverside reported less confidence in this range of skills preparation than the privately funded Seaside students did.

Table 6.5—How well equipped do you think this college will make you for the world of work in terms of the following types of skills?

Riverside (Public)	Very well equipped	Reasonably well equipped	Neutral	Not very well equipped	Poorly equipped
Technical knowledge/skills in your field	20%	33%	24%	22%	1%
Basic writing and reading skills	19%	26%	28%	25%	2%
Social skills	21%	22%	21%	31%	5%
Practical knowledge/skills	20%	28%	20%	28%	4%

Seaside (Private)	Very well equipped	Reasonably well equipped	Neutral	Not very well equipped	Poorly equipped
Technical knowledge/skills in your field	22%	43%	30%	13%	2%
Basic writing and reading skills	22%	47%	24%	5%	2%
Social skills	18%	30%	20%	29%	3%
Practical knowledge/skills	20%	35%	21%	21%	3%

Regarding the technical knowledge in their field of study, approximately half of the Riverside student sample expressed a belief that they were "very well equipped" or "reasonably well equipped", while 65% of students took this view at Seaside. However, almost a quarter of the Riverside student sample held the opposite view, while only 15% did so in Seaside. I wondered what the possible reasons were for the students feeling less confident about possessing these skills, especially those in the publicly funded Riverside college. An English major student Yifan explained to me her concerns:

Yifan: I never think I will develop a career by just using what [the skills and knowledge] we have been learning here at the college. I mean if you go in as a professional translator, I think it will require a higher level of accuracy and proficiency. Our training at vocational college can never meet that level. (Riverside)

Among the four types of skills, at both colleges, it was in the area of social skills that they felt least equipped. This skillset received the lowest percentage of students rating themselves as being very or reasonably well equipped (43% in Riverside; 48% in Seaside). Xiaoxin shared his opinions and experiences in relation to training in social skills at his college:

Xiaoxin: I feel that what we have here at the college is very restricted and limited with no contact with the outside world. And it is important to learn how to talk to people and relate to others. So, I found this summer job as a lifeguard in an amusement park. There were lots of tourists every day. Some of them were nice and reasonable, but some were not. I needed to find a way to talk to them. I feel I have enhanced my social skills a lot on that job, something which cannot be acquired at the college. (Riverside)

In addition to lacking social skills, it was found that the students felt they were short of practical knowledge or skills. Almost a third of the respondents at Riverside and a quarter at Seaside reported their lack of confidence with these types of skills. Having been almost entirely taught following a theory-based curriculum (see previous chapter), Guanglu was doubtful about his chances of finding a job in his field of study:

Guanglu: I don't think I can be optimistic about this [job hunting]. I feel lost actually. I don't know. After three years of college, just learning off books and theory, perhaps I can never acquire any real practical skills in this field [cost engineering]. Even if I manage to learn a thing or two. There will always be graduates who know more than I do, with more competent hands-on job skills in this field. There won't be a great chance of me getting hired. I may have to look in other field for jobs with greater chances. (Riverside)

It is evident from both sources of data that a significant percentage of students experienced a sense of inadequacy regarding their skills preparation and job readiness, which may render them unconfident when it comes to job hunting and possibly hinder the process of forming career plans or professional goals.

6.5 Any plans?

Having learned about the students' perceptions of the different factors that may influence their success in job-seeking and their level of confidence in skills readiness, I wondered if they had come up with any career plans and where they saw themselves progressing after completing college.

The questionnaire participants were asked: "To what extent do you have definite career plans?" The responses given to this question are summarised in Table 6.6. In these two samples of 200 students, only one in ten respondents had definite career plans at that point. A quarter had a "reasonable idea of what career to follow", 43% of them only had a "vague idea", while more than one in five of respondents did not have "any real idea". Compared to the Riverside respondents, rather more Seaside students had definite or reasonable plans (12% and 27%), with fewer of them reporting that they did not have any real idea (18%). It seems that in general there was a disturbingly large proportion of students having problems forming their career plans. The interview comments will help to further elaborate the status of their career planning.

Table 6.6—To what extent do you have definite career plans?

	Riverside (Public)		Seaside (Private)	
	Percentage		Percentage	
Have definite career plans		8%		12%
Have a reasonable idea of what career to follow		24%		27%
Have a vague idea of what career to follow		43%		43%
Do not have any real idea		25%		18%
Total	100		100	

6.5.1 Career plans

When asked about their career plans and goals, some of the students stated that they had 'not given it much thought', or that they had not found the things that really interest them. Others commented that they just wanted 'to get the degree for now'. Some had very vague ideas and relatively short-term plans:

> Int: So what are your career plans?

Hao: I don't like things that are too much trouble or too complicated. So, I imagine I will work as an office clerk or something like that and play basketball on the weekends. Yes, as long as I am happy.

Int: What kind of office work then?

Hao: I don't know. Anything will do. I will work for whoever [whichever employer] accepts me.

Int: What about Jia?

Jia: I never had any real plans actually. [Laughs] I guess I can do a white-collar job, you know, running some errands or assisting people in the office. Something stable.

Int: Just assisting jobs?

Jia: I don't think I have what it takes to be in a higher-level job. I can only see myself doing assisting jobs for now. As long as the pay is ok, I will do it. (Seaside)

Interestingly, I observed this attitude of 'I will work for whoever accepts me' in other students' statements as well. It seems that their first step into the workforce does not involve very mindful choosing or planning, but rather passively accepting whatever is available. A final-year student Qihan informed me of his situation:

Int: What kind of job do you think you will get after you finish college?

Qihan: Whatever I can find I guess, as long as someone is willing to take me on. Just today our counsellor messaged everyone that there is a job fair in the stadium for our soon-to-be graduates. I will go with anyone if they will offer me a job.

Int: What kind of companies and jobs will be presented at the job fair?

Qihan: I don't know. I don't think that matters. I would be so grateful if I could find anything. I am ok with anything. (Seaside)

Final-year student Xiu confirmed my observation and also pointed out that her classmates tend to plan their careers with very few strategies and often short-term perspectives:

Xiu: Many of my classmates, they think a job is a job and never think what next or how this will help them develop. That's a problem. They are happy just to get a job and earn some money. Sometimes I ask them what they really want to do. They say they don't know. So, they will apply for many different types of jobs in different fields, like this assistant or that trade clerk, and go to whatever kind of job fair in town, taking any job as soon as there is an offer available because they don't know much about those jobs and don't know what they want. (Seaside)

This situation of aimless job-searching and passive accepting was likely due to a possible lack of confidence among the students when facing the job market, as the findings indicate in the previous sections in this chapter. The perceived ceiling effect or their lack of skills readiness may lead the students to placing themselves at the bottom of the labour hierarchy. They constantly mentioned getting entry-level jobs with limited skills requirements that were 'not too complicated', or 'running errands in the office'. Having lower perceptions of their abilities, they failed to actively plan or strategically choose for their long-term career development, as they may in fact not hold conscious hopes and ambitions for their futures.

Three of the four teachers I interviewed commented on this phenomenon of directionless and lack of planning among their students. Lei (a teacher) revealed her concerns about her students:

> Lei (teacher): I think they are just aimless and not goal-oriented. They have no idea what they want to do in the future. At least the majority of them do not. Some had no interest in their major, but they also do not know what they would be interested in. (Seaside)

Ning (teacher) shared a similar view about her students:

> Very few students have a clear idea about their future plans. Most of them are passive all the time. For example, when the time comes—in their 3rd or final years, they realise they may need this skill for a job or that a certain position requires that qualification. They never seem to actively plan and manage for themselves. (Seaside)

It was interesting to hear what the students had to say on this matter. Further discussions with the students were conducted in focus group sessions in order to find out what was really going on behind their seemingly 'passive' and 'aimless' career-planning.

6.5.2 Passive and aimless?

Some students confessed that they constantly found themselves so uninformed, unguided or 'lost' that they were not able to come up with any practical plans in that moment. In a focus group session at Seaside, the students were talking about their plans:

Zhichao: I kind of want to further my study after this. But I do not know where to look or what to do. I do not know of any resources I should look into. I am feeling a bit lost.

Haibo: You know you need to make some efforts to achieve something. But in which direction? What can be achieved? What kind of efforts? How much effort? There is no predecessor or role model in this college saying that he or she is successful or has a promising early career, you know, someone you can look up to. Look at them [pointing at the 3rd year and final year students in the session], they are my seniors and still have no idea where next. So imagine how we feel. We are feeling even more lost. (Seaside)

Haibo pointed out that a lack of role models or successful predecessors in the college is one of the reasons for 'feeling lost', while Zhichao mentioned her lack of relevant information and resources. The students viewed the lack of peers to use as a means of comparison and to give them something to aspire to was a limitation. They did not have access to or understand the means by which they could achieve their goals.

Some students reported that this sense of disorientation they were experiencing was due to the fact that their curriculum lacked direction and their college life was in need of proper support and guidance.

Yuwei: I think we had to take way too many classes in the first and second year. Those classes are all over the place. This and that. We spent so much time in those classes that we didn't have time to think about what kind of job we want to do. This can easily create confusion and uncertainty. I wish they [the college] had given us a clearer picture of the job options relating to this programme at an early stage, so we could have started with something we are interested in, instead of aimlessly taking all those classes. (Seaside)

The findings here relate to Section 5.5.2 of the previous chapter, which highlighted the lack of careers guidance and advice provided at the colleges. This seems to have contributed to the students being 'passive' and 'aimless' in their career planning.

6.6 Where next?

The students were asked where they saw themselves progressing to upon completing college. Table 6.7 shows the percentage of students considering taking various different paths. In general, the most popular options among the students were "employment" and "further

academic study". At Riverside, more than half of the respondents wished to obtain employment upon completion. More than one in five of them wished to pursue further academic studies. In Seaside, 41% of the student sample were looking forward to joining the workforce, while 36% of them wished to continue their studies.
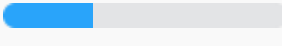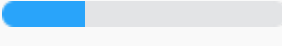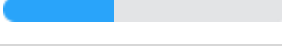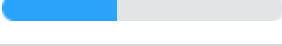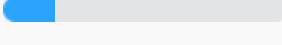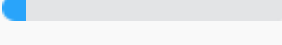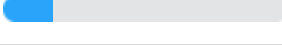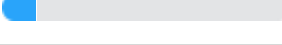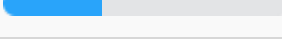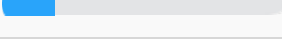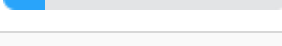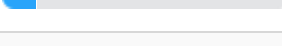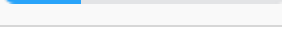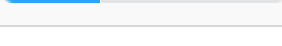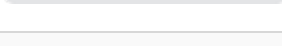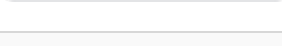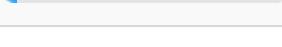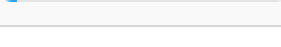
Table 6.7—What is your plan after completing college?

	Riverside (Public) Percentage	Seaside (Private) Percentage
Employment	54%	41%
Further vocational training (internship/Apprenticeship /traineeship)	6%	4%
Further academic study ("upgrading"/pursue overseas degrees)	22%	36%
Time off	1%	2%
Not so sure	17%	15%
Other, provide details:	0%	2%
Total	100	100

6.6.1 Obtaining employment—where do you see jobs?

Combining these two college samples, nearly half of the students considered going straight into employment after completing college. It is important to investigate in which sectors they thought they would most likely get a job. Table 6.8 illustrates the students' views on the sectors or industries in which they were most likely to find a job.

Table 6.8—To your knowledge, in which sector/industry is it easiest for you to get a job?

	Riverside (Public)	Seaside (Private)
	Percentage	Percentage
IT/communication industry	44%	56%
Banking/finance	32%	30%
Service industry	39%	41%
Real estate/construction	19%	8%
Manufacturing	18%	12%
Education/training	35%	30%
Retailing	15%	12%
Entrepreneur	28%	35%
Others, please specify:	0%	1%
I don't know	5%	6%

On the whole, IT/communication and the service industry were most frequently selected by the students as the sectors offering the best employment prospects. Chinese employment statistics also indicate that employment opportunities in the service economy are abundant. Jobs in the tertiary (service) sector grew by more than 30% between 2000 and 2010 (Central Government, 2013). Therefore, the odds of finding work in this sector are good. However, what these statistics do not show is the kinds of jobs these young people were going into. The following findings from the interviews with the students offer valuable insights.

The students talked about the working situation of their seniors and how they envisioned their lives in a few years' time:

Guanglu: I have a friend who has already graduated. She studied accounting in our college. But she works as a receptionist in a building, which is not relevant to what she did before. She said she just stands there most of the time and there is nothing to do at work. She earns very little and has to share a place with lots of people. I think it will be better for me not to stay in Tianjin. I don't think I will be able to support myself. (Riverside)

After interning at a major IT company for a few months, Xiu had come into contact with reality. She was deeply concerned about whether she should continue in her job as a full-time employee in the company:

> Xiu: There is a Seaside graduate in my team. She is a year above me and working full time here as a purchasing assistant. Actually, their wages are very low.
>
> Int: Is your company a big international IT cooperation and one of the Fortune Global 500[8]?
>
> Xiu: Yes, but they are still on low wages. It's around 3,000 Yuan a month. Given the current rent prices in Dalian, this money could only cover rent or some food costs.
>
> Int: What do you think of her job then?
>
> Xiu: I don't wish to continue working there as a full-time employee. I am hoping to do something in foreign trade, as it may offer commission or extra money. (Seaside)

The enormous growth in the Chinese service economy means that there was a huge demand for employees such as clerks, office personnel, assistants, and receptionists, and in entry-level computer jobs. Vocational graduates needed to learn to be flexible, as very few of them found jobs in their area of vocational training. In a focus group session, Wen shared his views:

> Wen: I have found that most of the people graduating from vocational college never go into their field of training. I know a guy who studied advertising design who works as a shop assistant now. He has the qualification of an ad designer, yet still works in a shop. The other guy I know did his training in power plant mechanics and does the same job in the shop now. Their pay is not that good. Sometimes I feel the school [skills and knowledge learned at the college] is not that valuable as you are more likely to do something else anyway. (Riverside)

6.6.2 Further study—trying to be the 15%

As can be seen from Table 6.7, more than one in five of the respondents in Riverside intended to further their academic studies, while almost two in five of Seaside respondents had a similar plan. Those in three-year vocational programmes intended to take an "upgrade" exam

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[8] Fortune Global 500 is the group of the world's 500 largest companies, which in 2017 generated $30 trillion in revenues and $1.9 trillion in profits.

to enrol on an academic programme, while those in four-year programmes intended to take exams to enrol in graduate schools. I learned from the three-year vocational students that there were two schemes they could choose if they decided to obtain an academic degree: one is "top-up", requiring them to take an extra course and exams, which, I was told, is relatively easy to do, although the final "academic" degree is not widely recognised. The other scheme, which the students called the "real upgrade", requires a tremendous number of extra classes and preparation for the exams, followed by two years of study at an academic university should they manage to pass the exams. The final degree obtained through this scheme is accepted by the public and the student's first degree would be an "academic degree". I later confirmed this information with the school staff. Having seen the value of an academic first degree, most of the students had their minds set on embarking on this demanding second route.

At Riverside College, I could not help but notice the many flyers and brochures on upgrading training courses left on the desks in classrooms and the canteen. I picked up a few of them to read through. The names of prestigious universities in Tianjin were printed in large font, along with a list of successful candidates and photos of them holding their admission letters. The message was clear: You can be one of them. You could no longer be a vocational graduate. You could be going to your dream universities. Xiaoxin talked about his experience with these training companies:

> Xiaoxin: I remember when we first got here [the college], people from these companies hosted big lectures. They talked passionately about ambitions and dreams. They made these upgrade exams sound so easy that you just wanted to pay for their courses and, bang, you are an academic.
> Int: Were there many people paying for the courses then?
> Xiaoxin: Yes, many signed up when we were first years. My roommate signed up, but he kind of slept through those classes the entire year. Now I think he's kind of given up on that. (Riverside)

Despite what the training company advertised, it is never easy to pass upgrade exams. The students at Riverside discussed their chances of passing the exam:

> Cheng: It is very hard for the majority of the students to upgrade.
> Int: Why is that?

Cheng: I know the chance is 15%. They only allow a certain percentage of people to upgrade.

Annan: Like in finance, they have too many people in that programme. So there will be fewer chances for them. Plus, it is a difficult exam. (Riverside)

Some explained their reasons for exerting such efforts to secure this 'upgrade', even though they were aware that 85% of them would end up failing the exam.

Tai: For me, having a vocational degree is far from enough. Upgrading is the only way to improve myself and be on a higher level, increasing my chances in the job market. (Riverside)

Cheng: If I got the upgrade chance, then I would definitely take it. That means I would have an academic degree and I could find better jobs. (Riverside)

Guanglu: After the upgrade exams, it will be two more years in university. You will be holding an academic degree which is recognised throughout the country, unlike the "top-up", where you will still have a vocational first degree, nobody would care if you have another degree after that. Going through upgrade exams will certainly increase your chances of success [in finding a job]. (Riverside)

Among all of the participants in the study, Yifan was the keenest to take the upgrade exams. She told me that although it could take a long time to prepare for the exams, she was determined and prepared to re-sit them if she failed to get through the first time. She may have regarded the upgrade exams as another chance to get into academic universities after she had failed the CEE. Similar to Yifan, some had in fact intended to "upgrade" ever since they had realised that their lower CEE test scores would fail to take them to universities:

Zehua: I found online that this college [Riverside] has the highest upgrading rate among all the vocational colleges in Tianjin. That's why I decided to go here. They said there were 105 people who succeeded. So, I told myself: 'I won't take the CEE again, I will do an upgrade'. (Riverside)

6.6.3 Obtaining professional qualifications

When it comes to increasing their chances in the job market, almost all the students spoke of obtaining certificates or qualifications, in addition to upgrading to academic degrees. Table 6.9 illustrates the types of qualifications or certificates the students had obtained or intended to obtain.

Table 6.9—What qualifications/certificates have you obtained or are you planning to obtain?

	Riverside (Public)	Seaside (Private)
	Percentage	Percentage
Professional qualifications in your field	34%	18%
English proficiency (College English Test 4)	40%	63%
English proficiency (College English Test 6)	28%	35%
English A level certificate	16%	11%
IT/computer literacy certificates	34%	21%
Mandarin proficiency test	33%	39%
Other	23%	37%
Haven't done anything like that/no plan to do anything like that	17%	25%

As can be seen from the table above, the most popular certificates were language-based ones, like English proficiency and Mandarin proficiency, as well as IT-related ones. Riverside students (34%) also valued professional qualification in their field. The students believed that holding more certificates would enhance their employability.

> Wei: I think I should work on all the certificates that I can possibly get. I got a certificate in Standard Mandarin last year. I feel if I got more certificates, I could have an advantage over the others. (Riverside)

As can be seen from Wei's statement, he was eager to 'have an advantage', and obtaining more certificates would provide evidence of his personal achievements, which he could subsequently show to employers. However, there are doubts about the actual value of the supposedly leverage-increasing qualifications that the students were trying to obtain. For example, Xiaoxin spoke about obtaining a particular vocational qualification in his cost engineering programme:

> Xiaoxin: Our programme requires us to obtain at least one vocational qualification. We did that already last semester.
>
> Int: That's great. What vocational qualification is that?
>
> Xiaoxin: It's a qualification for construction workers. It's nothing actually. You pay some money and you will get the exam papers and the answers. And you get your qualification. Our teachers told us the eight major qualifications in construction were all like this. It's just a formality, I guess. There was no learning experience whatsoever. (Riverside)

These vocational qualifications that Xiaoxin and his classmates gained were of low quality and little value; they were merely a purchasable 'formality' and did not provide the skills and knowledge the students would need for frontline production. It is not clear how they could 'have an advantage' by obtaining this kind of qualification.

The students of both vocational colleges talked a great deal about their upgrade exams or taking tests to obtain certificates, all of which is academic-oriented. I seldom encountered students talking about furthering their vocational training. As Table 6.7 shows, very few of the young people at Riverside or Seaside (6% and 4%) indicated their intention to undertake any further vocational training programmes. Compared with the highly popular English proficiency tests, the students were less concerned about their practical training. Table 6.10 below shows the practical programmes the students had undertaken or planned to enrol in. More than half of the student sample at both colleges had not undergone and did not intend to undergo any practical training, such as through internships, apprenticeships or volunteer work. At Riverside, less than 40% of the students had undertaken or planned to undertake an internship, and one in ten of them had done or intended to do vocational training. At Seaside, the proportions of students interested in these practical programmes were even lower (31% for internships; 5% for vocational traineeships).

Table 6.10—What practical programmes have you undergone or are you planning to undergo?

	Riverside (Public)	Seaside (Private)
	Percentage	Percentage
Internship programme in your field of study	25%	17%
Internship programme outside your field of study	14%	13%
Vocational Traineeship/apprenticeship	10%	5%
Volunteer programme	20%	20%
Other programmes	7%	6%
Haven't done anything like that/no plan to do anything like that	52%	54%

It is interesting to observe that these vocational students showed great enthusiasm for pursuing academic-oriented goals, while vocational training programmes were less considered. This finding is likely due to the fact that the youngsters believed that only academic efforts were considered 'things you are supposed to do'. With a great deal of admiration, they referred to their friends at academic universities as people 'who are so driven and know exactly what to do' (See next chapter). By comparison, vocational training programmes were less appealing as they are not deemed to be something that a driven mindful student would choose. Another possible reason for vocational training's lack of appeal is that according to the teaching staff the students were not made aware of other practical vocational skill training opportunities, apart from the internship positions available at Seaside's job fair and the internship arrangement at Riverside. In a vocational programme, the students and their achievements are still somehow measured and compared through a constant academically focused 'gaze' (Foucault, 1977), formed by their colleges, their families, their peers, and the students themselves. This issue will be further explored in the next chapter in relation to the stereotypes.

6.7 Comparing the two colleges

This section brings together the similarities and differences found between the state-funded Riverside and the privately funded Seaside. Regarding the students' attitudes towards their

employment prospects, fewer Seaside respondents reported they were very/somewhat optimistic about securing a suitable job (19%) (see Table 6.1). However, the students from both colleges were aware of the potential ceiling effect they could be facing (Section 6.2). Although 8% more students at Seaside thought that finding a job was very much down to the individual (see Table 6.3), students from both colleges emphasised the importance of individual competency (Section 6.3.1). In terms of skills preparation, the students at the privately funded college rated themselves better equipped across all skills (technical, writing and reading skills, social, and practical) than the students at the state-funded college (Table 6.5). Approximately 7% more privately funded college students had definite career plans or a reasonable idea of a career to follow (see Table 6.6). However, students from both colleges demonstrated a passiveness in "choosing" their employment, and reported a lack of careers guidance to help them make their plans (Sections 6.5 and 6.6.1). Around 14% more of the privately funded college students wished to pursue academic studies, while 13% more of the publicly funded college students wanted to find employment after completing college (see Table 6.7). The students from both colleges expressed concerns about the potential low-paying jobs they may end up with (Section 6.6.1). In order to prepare themselves to be more employable, the students from both colleges tended to have more academic goals (e.g. working on their English proficiency) than vocational ones (e.g. vocational training) (Section 6.6.3). The similarities between the students' experiences at both the private and the publicly funded colleges serve to highlight the societal attitudes towards vocational students in China, and the students' resultant experiences, regardless of their social backgrounds. It is these attitudes and experiences that are the focus of this study, rather than any social class distinctions.

6.8 Summary

The findings from this chapter illustrate the vocational students' perceptions of the job market and their career plans. Based on their personal experiences or on second-hand information, the students perceived a ceiling effect constraining their career options, as their vocational degrees might be considered inferior to academic ones. However, others did not think that their degrees would be a barrier to obtaining employment. Instead, they believed that finding a suitable job was down to the individual's capabilities and personal achievements, rather than to external factors. Those who held external factors to be important believed that family connections and job opportunities in the region were the main factors that would affect their success in finding a job. The findings also show a lack of confidence in their skills preparation and job readiness among the vocational students,

especially at the public college. As for their future plans, a disturbingly large proportion of students (25% at Riverside; 18% at Seaside) had problems forming their career plans. Some students tended to passively accept whatever jobs were on the table rather than mindfully choosing one. Approximately half of the student sample intended to obtain employment after completing college. IT and the service industry were the sectors which the students felt offered the greatest chances of employment. However, the students were concerned about the possible poor quality and low pay of service industry jobs; they also expressed concerns about not being able to find jobs that would be relevant to their areas of study. A significant percentage of students (22% at Riverside; 36% at Seaside) expressed an interest in furthering their academic studies. Even though the chances of their "upgrading" were slim, some were still determined to try, and regarded the opportunity to "upgrade" as another chance of getting into academic universities having failed the CEE. While the students also talked about obtaining qualifications/certificates that could enhance their employability, some vocational qualifications on the market were of low quality and little value. Lastly, it can be seen from the findings that the students showed more enthusiasm for pursuing academically oriented goals than they did for vocational training.

6.9 Discussion

The findings in this chapter address Research Question 4—What are vocational students' perspectives of their future career possibilities? An in-depth discussion of the findings is on Chapter 8. The comparative advantages of vocational college graduates are not apparent and are easily surpassed by university graduates (Ding, 2004). Therefore, the students may consider their vocational degrees to be inferior, as employers' demands for certain types and levels of qualification are transmitted back to young people via incentives and signals like wages and the likelihood of obtaining jobs (Ehrenberg and Smith, 2000; Keep, 2006). Young people's perceptions of job opportunities are formed by considering, in their terms, the evidence available to them about jobs and careers, drawing on personal experience or on the testimonies of insiders they know and whose judgement they respect (Hodkinson et al., 1996). However, even though they are in a possibly disadvantaged position in the labour market, the students in my study stressed that hard work and personal achievements are the bases of success. They had been trained within a 'framework of liberal possessive individualism' and were taught to see 'the individual as essentially the proprietor of his (or presumably her) own person and capacities' (Ball, 2013, p. 73). Lacking confidence in their skills preparation and in their abilities, the vocational students failed to actively plan for their long-term career goals. These perceptions or ability-related 'beliefs' play a highly influential

role in forming career aspirations and pursuits (Bandura, 1997; Bandura et al., 2001). Vocational graduates face a labour market in which there is a huge demand for employees in the service industry (Central Government, 2013); yet, those jobs are likely to be unskilled, precarious, low-paid, and dead-end ones (Woronov, 2013, p. 115). The students needed to learn to be 'flexible workers' as part of a reflexive life-time biographical project that can respond to new risks and uncertainties (Ball et al., 2000; Woronov, 2013). As mentioned above, pursuing an academic route was more popular among the vocational students than continuing vocational training.

The next chapter will uncover the construction of the stereotyping against vocational students and explore how they see themselves in relation to their peers pursuing academic routes.

Chapter 7 Findings—THE STEREOTYPE

7.1 Introduction

Vocational students in China are generally viewed as educational failures. They are seen as lazy, intellectually and morally suspect youth who deserve their fates (Woronov, 2015; Ling, 2015). Assigning students to vocational college based on their CEE scores meant that the teachers saw the students as, by definition, lazy and stupid. The teachers' assumptions derived from the "vocational college" label, rather than from their own evaluations of the relative abilities of the individual pupils (Ball, 1981, p. 36). Vocational students experience such stereotyping in various aspects of their lives as a result of the label they carry, and are therefore compelled to behave as those academically inclined do, or perform toward the 'optimum of action' (Foucault, 1977, p.183; Ball, 2013). This chapter investigates the construction of the stereotypes, along with the students' perspectives of the stereotyping. It addresses Research Question 5, examining how the vocational students saw themselves, their views on the current hierarchical exam-based tracking system, and what they thought differentiated them from academic students.

7.2 The stereotypes— 'they are bad seeds'

When the students entered vocational colleges, they had been pre-selected and sorted according to their CEE scores. They carried their own particular statuses within the educational system and their teachers held preconceived and institutionalised notions about "typical vocational students". I interviewed four teachers, all of whom had over ten years' experience of working in vocational colleges, to investigate their attitudes toward the students. It is not difficult to identify the ways in which the students are stereotyped just from listening to the ways the teachers described and characterised them.

After completing her master's degree 12 years previously at one of the most prestigious universities in Dalian, Ning started teaching at Seaside. On the subject of her students, she said:

> Ning (teacher): When I was their age, I worked so hard at university and everyone worked hard. But our students…they only do the minimum amount of work that they are told to do by the teachers. They are always forced to do stuff. We have done

everything we can to help them actually. But they are bad seeds. What do you expect us to grow out of bad seeds?

Int: Do they have any positive attributes, would you say?

Ning (teacher): Actually, some students have a higher level of emotional intelligence. They know how to socialise with people and be flexible. I think this has something to do with them having poor grades in high school. They probably used their time to play or do something else, thus were more sociable than academic students. (Seaside)

As can be seen from the above comments, vocational students are regarded as passive and idling youths who 'only do the minimum amount of work', whereas academic students 'work hard' and are always keen to study. Therefore, the vocational students are viewed as 'bad seeds', as indicated by their inferior test scores and their assigning to vocational colleges. Even their good social skills were turned against them and portrayed as merely the result of poorly invested time, further verifying their 'bad seed' status.

All of the teaching staff I interviewed at Seaside concurred at some level with the stereotypical view above, as illusrated here:

Lei (teacher): I have never seen them really motivated to do any work. They probably are just reluctant to make any effort. We always have to push them to do stuff. (Seaside)

Lianshuang (teacher): Teaching is never an easy occupation, *especially teaching vocational kids*. They need constant encouragement to get things done. Otherwise, they will just slack off. (Seaside)

At Riverside, Jia (teacher) reported that her students 'never seemed to get' what was delivered in class and had a 'hard time understanding the text books'. It seems that the teachers were inclined to jump from observing the students' behaviours to a general conclusion that this "kind of student" is inferior. From the teachers' points of view, the behaviour of their students was "deviant" and contravened their expectations of normative student behaviour. Any qualities the vocational students had were automatically associated with or defined by their inadequate academic performance. Ning also believed that the reason for the students being assigned to a vocational college was due to their lack of intelligence:

Ning (teacher): As much as some people like to deny it, it is a matter of intelligence. The College Entrance Exam [CEE] is a test of one's intelligence. I never believe that some kids are smart, but they just didn't test well and end up here [vocational college]. (Seaside)

The great CEE performers were 'smart' and, by implication, the vocational college students were not. This fairly arbitrary line of demarcation between students constructs the preconceived stereotypical notions that the teachers hold of their students. Teachers like Ning demonstrably held stereotypical images of the "vocational student identity". Once these notions are established, further observation or information is sought to confirm and strengthen their perceptions of the students' inferiority.

From the college staff's perceptions of their students, it is easy to capture the stereotypes to which the vocational students are subjected. Significantly, these stereotypes were prevalent not only within the college, but were multidimensional and impacted the students' everyday lives.

7.3 Spoiled, lazy and low-quality

Vocational students are placed into the "under-performing" or "low-ability" tracks according to their test scores, which are more than just a quantitative expression of educational mobility. The findings presented in this section also shed light on the stereotyping the students experienced from people outside of their colleges.

The young people's narratives capture their experiences of how others view them. For example, the privately funded Seaside students were frequently on the receiving end of detrimental comments such as 'spoiled rich kids' or described as being students who 'just buy a degree'.

Shinan: When we talk to taxi drivers or people in the neighbourhood here, they ask which college we are in. Once they know it's Seaside, they say something like: 'You guys must have rich families'. They may think we are spoiled rich kids. It's a private vocational college. They think we just purchase a degree here. (Seaside)

In line with the stereotype of being 'spoiled rich kids' attending a private vocational college, the students also reported being regarded as people who 'just laze away and drift in college' or 'never study. As Shinan continues, 'They think we are just lazy and can barely learn anything at all. No knowledge, skills, or abilities.' Bo observed similar perceptions held by the locals of Seaside students.

> Bo: I was born in Dalian. I know what people have been saying about this college [Seaside] over the years. Their impression is that the students are not great and are never dedicated to their studies. You may have other good attributes, but Seaside students will always be poor at studying. That's for sure. (Seaside)

However, it was not only the locals who perceived them as 'poor students' who were 'never dedicated to their studies'; they received a similar message from their parents, too. Yuehan shared the views her parents expressed when they were visiting her on campus.

> Yuehan: My parents visited me for a month last year. They said the campus and buildings were nice. But other aspects were just disappointing. For example, my mum was walking around in the building when I was in class. She told me she constantly saw lots of students playing on their laptops or phones when they were having classes. She asked me why they always have their games on during classes and why they did not study. She was very disappointed to see the kids playing and passing their time away and told me not to do the same as it is *typical vocational student behaviour*. (Seaside)

The vocational students were constantly exposed to the perceptions that they were automatically lazy and tended to play their college years away. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the reasons why the students appeared to 'laze away and drift in college' or 'pass time' could be traced back to the curricula which are not vocationally oriented, or the pedagogical methods that fail to engage them, or an assessment regime that is demotivating. Yet the dominant stereotypical view of students at vocational colleges conveniently assigns the blame to the individual students, who, it is presumed, are naturally lazy and devoid of self-motivation.

Similarly, the students at the publicly funded Riverside felt that they were considered of low quality (known as *suzhi*[9]). Vocational college students tend to have a reputation for having low *suzhi* and behaving improperly because common-sense logic in China tends to equate exam results with an individual's moral and personal value. As Guanglu explains:

> You know what people in the society think of us? They think academic students have better *suzhi* [quality]. They think that we, vocational students, just hang out, pick fights, play around all the time, like hooligans; that we spend our time in night clubs or game rooms. Anyway, we cannot be good in their eyes. We are automatically of low *suzhi*. (Riverside)

The students realised that they were perceived by the public as spoiled rich private-college kids with lazy habits, unmotivated, playing around and probably with low moral standards as well. It seems that they viewed being a vocational college student as being stigmatised.

So far, we have seen how the vocational college staff perceived their students, and we have also seen, through the students' own observations and experiences, how the students are perceived both by their local communities and by the public at large. But it is also important to explore how the students perceived themselves and their place in the tracking system, within the context of the negative stereotyping they experienced both in and out of college.

7.4 Student perspectives and the "logic" of meritocracy

Thirty-five out of the thirty-six vocational students who participated in the qualitative phase of the research believed the current system to be meritocratic. Meritocracy, as the term implies, advocates the giving of rewards to individuals based on merit or achievement (Walton et al., 2013). There was a popular assumption among my participants that the CEE provides all students with the same starting point when they take the tests. Once the test scores are published and compared, individual students are rewarded based on their test performance; hence, the results were fair and just. A surprisingly large percentage of the students I encountered raved about the fairness of the system. They held the view that one's life chances ought to accord with their level of test performance. Final-year student Xiu, for example, was a devoted believer in the meritocratic system:

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[9] *Suzhi* is a term used often since the late 1990s to devalue elements of the populations for lacking education, morality, culture and civility (Anagnost, 2004), and also often used to refer to vocational education students (Ling, 2015). Good *suzhi* in the public view means "proper behaviour", typically associated with the formal, academically oriented educational system.

Xiu: I think it is pretty fair that it [the system] assigns us to different levels of college. You get into the level of college which you are capable of [by achieving the necessary admission test scores]. Therefore, a certain level of college leads to certain future opportunities. I think the level of degree or academic achievement says a lot about someone. To some extent, it could represent your capabilities as a person. If you don't have the proper degree and you say that you are very able at this and that, no one will believe you. The degree and the level of college you went to are the best proof of everything. (Seaside)

Xiaoxin had a similar view:

Xiaoxin: I think society values the degree so much because it's a fair way to judge who is better than who. It's the most obvious way to show someone you are a stronger candidate compared with other people. (Riverside)

Under the logic of meritocracy, the exam system naturally rewards clever, hard-working students, whilst, in accordance with the stereotyping, vocational students are castigated as stupid and lazy individuals who deserve to be relegated to vocational college and limited career options. For my participants, the stereotype was internalised, as they believed one's test performance was regarded as a fair evaluating mechanism. In their eyes, a variety of student attributes could be identified from the test score, such as how hard-working or resilient the students are. The vocational students thus tended to see themselves as being inadequate in terms of their levels of intelligence, diligence, or motivation. The following section explores in greater depth the students' perceptions of those attributes or "merits", how they saw themselves and their performance, and what they thought set them apart from the high-performing test-takers and scholars.

7.4.1 Not hardworking, playing around

The majority of participants believed that an excellent test performance could demonstrate a student's diligence and commitment. They used expressions such as 'hard-working', 'the amount of effort equals the amount of return', or 'no pain no gain'. Below is a selection of the students' comments articulating their meritocratic logic:

Yujie: If they could manage to get into Tsinghua University, I am sure they must be excellent in every aspect. Not only good at school work, they must be perseverant, resilient, hard-working, dedicated and willing to commit and put in effort. Yes, they must put in more effort than others. Those people who just give up easily can never get into Tsinghua. What kind of effort you put in and what you get in the end are certainly proportional. (Seaside)

Xuhui: One's academic outcome shows the results of years of hard work. If they got a higher test score then they must have higher pursuits [ambitions], be more devoted and know how to control themselves. They can stick to something because a good test score cannot be achieved overnight. (Riverside)

For Yujie, getting into a "top" university such as Tsinghua is a matter of individual students having a "top" level of diligence and resilience. Xuhui indicates that personal commitment and self-discipline could result in 'a good test score'. Apparently, for them, the amount of effort must equate with the exam outcomes. In light of the above popularly held views, the students tended to think of themselves as 'not working hard enough' or 'playing around too much', even though some of them described having a demanding work load and an overwhelming study schedule to prepare for the CEE (see Chapter 4). The students said:

Guoshuai: I think everyone starts running at the same line. If you were hard-working and diligent enough, you would definitely get the results you want. Because we did not work as hard as others back in high school, our test scores were not as good as theirs. Hence, we came here [to vocational college]. If we just work a little bit harder, we could get into a good university. (Riverside)

Xiaoxin: In high school, I or we, the majority of us vocational students, probably played around too much or drifted through. Unlike others, they worked from dawn to dusk very intensively all by themselves for three years. (Riverside)

As can be seen here, Guoshuai believes in the meritocratic system, as is evidenced by the phrase: 'everyone starts running at the same line'. There is no recognition that there might be different starting points due to different social backgrounds or different abilities. The students had internalised the dominant stereotypical view of vocational students as being lazy and playing their time away. They could only explain their being in the bottom track by

referring to the popular assumption that they must not be making adequate efforts or that they have the habit of 'playing around too much'.

7.4.2 Never get anything done

When discussing the most important qualities required to achieve better academic outcomes, a number of students talked about the ability to take action. This is also seen as one of the main differences between the vocational students and the academic students:

> Wei: I think there is huge gap between us [vocational students] and the academic students.
>
> Int: What kind of gap?
>
> Wei: Lots of my classmates say that they would prepare for the upgrade exam or have this target or that goal. The plans are all perfect. But they never get anything done.
>
> Int: What about the academic students?
>
> Wei: I am sure academic students are never like this. I think they know what they are supposed to do. They have better self-control, take actions and always get things done. (Riverside)

In Wei's view, the reason for his fellow classmates failing to fulfil their plans was that, unlike the academic students, the vocational students did not know what they were supposed to do and lacked the initiative to 'get things done'. The things they thought they were supposed to do were judged and valued in accordance with academic standards. Those who failed to work towards those academic targets must logically be unmotivated and have a habit of slacking off.

7.4.3 Not smart enough

Some students saw themselves as less intelligent than the academically inclined students. This provided them with convenient explanations of how they had been tracked into vocational college. Jieren commented:

> Jiren: I think different academic outcomes mean different levels of intelligence.
>
> Int: Why is that?
>
> Jiren: I think they [the academic students] are smarter than me. I actually believe so. I have been taking this training course with students from Haishi [a nearby academic

university]. In class, the way I think is so different from them. And they always get the right answers. I feel I am never smart enough. (Seaside)

As can be seen from the above statements, the student believed the academic students to be 'smarter' as 'they always get the right answers in class'. Jiren's inability to perform as academic students did in class made him question his own intelligence or feel that he was 'never smart enough'.

7.4.4 Negative learning environment

Besides seeing themselves as not hardworking, unmotivated or even less intelligent, the students also commented on their learning environment. Interestingly, their opinions here concurred with the stereotypical views that they observed. The students that I interviewed reported encountering a negative learning environment in their current vocational colleges or classrooms. After listening to them elaborate further on this issue, I realised they were passing the same forms of judgement on their vocational classrooms that they perceived others passing on them. For example, Shuo expressed her opinion about the negative learning environment:

> Shuo: I think the learning environment here in this college could be better. People are just too relaxed. I do not feel the desire to study from everyone around me. They never have the desire to learn. I am sure the library in academic universities must be packed and that is a good learning environment. (Riverside)

Similarly, Guanglu also praised the 'good learning environment' he imagined at academic universities:

> Guanglu: I think that everyone must be working hard for their studies at good colleges. They take their school work seriously, not like people here in this college. If everyone could be more hard-working and motivated, then the environment here could be so much better. (Riverside)

For these students, in line with the stereotypical views, it is regular visits to the library and always studying hard that are the only indicators of a positive learning environment, and these represent how a "good student" should behave. Attending a vocational college, they witnessed the opposite of normative student behaviour, or what society would expect from

a youth at college. Therefore, they tended to identify themselves and their fellow classmates as being 'too relaxed', 'never hav[ing] the desire to learn' or not 'tak[ing] their school work seriously'. Undoubtedly, vocational students evaluated the college and themselves through the same lens as the stereotypes they perceived. However, this perceived negative learning environment could possibly be an outcome of the teachers' failure to motivate and discipline the students in class (see Sections 5.3 and 5.4).

7.4.5 Feeling inadequate and ashamed

It can be seen from the above accounts that these young people were living within a frame of constant comparison and self-comparison. Their thoughts or actions were made meaningful and of value to the extent that their outcomes were up to certain academic standards. As a result of this process of self-auditing, these young people felt inadequate and inferior as they were different from those who were regarded as "good students":

> Shuo: They [my friends at academic universities] are always very confident. The way they express themselves and everything. I always admire the fact that they have such confidence.
>
> Int: Do you think you are confident?
>
> Shuo: I don't think I am good enough to have confidence. I have nothing to be confident about.
>
> Int: Why do you think they are good?
>
> Shuo: For example, they [my friends at academic universities] post something on social media about a book they read. They can capture the essence of the book so well. And for me, I do not think I can see as deeply as they do. I guess that's the difference. (Riverside)

Under the influence of dominant stereotypes, the vocational students saw themselves as having 'nothing to be confident about', as Shuo notes. Some even felt embarrassed by the very name of their college:

> Tengteng: Those top universities, they are so different. Even their names sound different, indicating their quality education and good reputation. My high school classmate went to study law at Renmin University. Renmin University! [Laughs] He must be a big lawyer in the future. But we are here at *vocational* college. There is a vast gap here. (Riverside)

The academically focused societal values help to maintain the hierarchy of the Chinese education system. The simplistic positioning of Renmin University's students at the top, as the best and brightest, while vocational college students are located at the bottom, as the very opposite, seems to be plausible to everyone. Therefore, the students believed that there were apparent differences in the "attributes" or "merits" between themselves and the academically inclined students. For the vocational students, there is an evident gap between the diligent and the sluggish, or between the smart and the less-abled, or between the driven and the aimless and unmotivated. It appears that the exam-based tracking system was regarded as a meritocracy that naturally rewards clever, hardworking, and motivated students; thus, students who were tracked into vocational colleges must be lazy, stupid and play around. These stereotypes appear to automatically explain any individual differences and mask fundamental issues in the educational system. No one bothers to investigate whether "exam smart" is really equivalent to all of these other "merits", nor whether it might be the admission system or the curriculum itself that keeps the students unmotivated. The students were constantly compared with academic students and their performances in college were only evaluated according to academic standards. They appeared to be aimless because the "aims" were only visible in terms of an academic standard and they had never been properly supported or guided in a skill-oriented vocational context. It is important to ask where these public stereotypes come from and why these young people tend to internalise them.

7.5 Construction of the stereotypes

The more I heard about these youngsters' experiences of the stereotypes, the more curious I was to know how it came about. Through vignettes, this section begins with an investigation of the construction of the stereotypes in the context of powerful academically focused societal sentiments and attitudes. The vignettes illustrate the students' experiences of the rationale of meritocracy in their family and school lives.

7.5.1 Family expectations

The expectations of the students' families appeared to be the most evident manifestations of these powerful social attitudes. The students talked a great deal about their parents and how their attitudes influenced their feelings and actions. For example, Qiang's accounts highlighted his parents' high hopes for him, as well as the enormous burden these hopes placed on him, his mother and their relationship.

Qiang is a very resourceful and talkative 21-year-old young man. He is in his first year at Riverside on a cost engineering programme (a course in the management of engineering project costs). His parents own a small clothes shop in his hometown in Liaoning province. His older cousin, also from a working-class family, has progressed to becoming a government official in Beijing thanks to his high academic achievements. He is "the phoenix flying from a henhouse", as the Chinese idiom goes. Since Qiang's childhood, his mother has compared his school performance in reference to this "phoenix" cousin's. Unfortunately, Qiang's grades have been less desirable than his mother expected, which has caused a great deal of tension between the two of them. Qiang feels enormous pressure and guilt for being a "bad student". He sees it as not fulfilling his filial duty. His mother also has little confidence or trust in his ability to make his career decisions by himself as he has failed to prove himself to be the "a good student" as his cousin was. His poor grades have made his mother worry about his future. Therefore, the decision to study cost engineering at Riverside was made for Qiang by his parents as Qiang's employment could be "looked after" by his cousin after completion. Qiang is not happy with always living in the shadow of his cousin and not being able to win his mother's faith. His dream is to become a successful businessman so that he can prove to his mother that he can make it by himself.

As can be seen from Qiang's story, he was always compared to his cousin who gained upward mobility through his academic achievements. Achieving better academic outcomes was regarded as the right way to go, the "filial" thing to do. Moreover, it was the route to winning his parents' trust and confidence. In Qiang's mother's view, academic success naturally leads to career progression and upward mobility, while poor academic outcomes may indicate a dubious future. Therefore, Qiang's actions were constantly compared with his "phoenix" cousin's, who, with his excellent academic record, was always the example or target set by Qiang's mother. Qiang shared with me his feelings about being constantly compared:

> Qiang: My mom always talked about how great my cousin was ever since I was a kid. He got this award and that merit for his good grades. I always see my cousin as Mount Everest. But, as I'm only wearing shorts and sandals, how can I ever climb that far with these? I was never made for climbing, I guess, because we are different and have different paths. But my mom didn't know that. She thought studying was the only way out, and if my cousin did it, I could do it too. She never asked me what I wanted to do. If I told her about my ideas, we would just argue. (Riverside)

Qiang pointed out the huge gap between him and his cousin and their 'different paths'. What was regarded by his parents as the 'only way out' may not be suitable for him. However, in

Qiang's case, being 'different' meant being seen as disappointing, inferior, or behaving as "a bad student", something which would never be approved of by his parents or the prevalent social values. Among the vocational students I encountered, Qiang was not the only one experiencing high family expectations in terms of their academic studies. Yuehan's story is also worth mentioning here.

Vignette 2: Yuehan
Yuehan is a 22-year-old young lady. She is from Henan province, the most populated region in central China. She is in her third year of Business English programme at Seaside. Her father is a senior police officer and her mother is a college lecturer. Yuehan's father used to be an excellent scholar when he was a student, so he has always been very strict with Yuehan when it comes to her studies. Every time she falls behind or fails to improve her test scores in an exam, her father leaves a long letter on her desk and refuses to talk to her for a few days. He gets very angry if he finds his daughter sleeping late, watching TV, playing with her phone, or "slacking off". After she did not do well at the CEE, her father did not talk to her for an entire month. He was so disappointed and never said a word when he came home from work every day. In Yuehan's hometown, there was a tradition of people hosting a banquet to celebrate their children going to college. Yuehan's father did not host any banquet for his daughter when she went to Seaside, as he thought her test score was too low and there was nothing to celebrate. Her father eventually did help Yuehan choose her college and major in the hope that his daughter would gain English-related qualifications and also upgrade to a master's degree. Yuehan was reluctant to upgrade as she has always hated her area of study. But she has been taking extra classes and trying really hard to gain the necessary qualifications, even though she finds it torturous. She tries to be as diligent as possible in front of her father as she worries that she would upset him if she did not.

Students like Yuehan, from the more populated regions where competition for college places is fiercer, faced immense pressure from their families to perform well in their academic studies. Her father's silent treatment following her academic failures, his anger towards her for not investing time in her studies, and his displays of disappointment made Yuehan pursue academic excellence even though she had little interest in doing so. Moreover, Qinqiang, a final-year student, shared his view of his parental expectations:

> Qinqiang: Many people hate their time in college. I think the reason for them going to college in the first place is for their parents. Actually, it is perfectly fine finding your own way without going to college. But your parents push you to get your degree because they think it is the best for you. They would worry if you were out there not even having a degree. It's the mainstream way of thinking. (Seaside)

This 'mainstream way of thinking' which leads parents to push their children to achieve higher academic outcomes was articulated in all of the students' life stories related above. On some level, the vocational students felt guilty about their failure in the academic competition and about the disappointment it brought to their parents. However, it was not only their parents that expected academic excellence from them; their whole high school learning experiences prepared them for achieving it.

7.5.2 High-school learning experiences

Chinese high schools are designed to prepare students to take the CEE at the end of their senior year (Woronov, 2015, p. 5). These high schools are ranked according to their graduates' scores on the CEE and their eventual university admission rates, with prestigious "key" schools positioned at the top and local neighbourhood high schools at the bottom (Woronov, 2015, p. 5). Those whose test scores are not high enough for universities are often advised by their teachers to take the Spring CEE, which is an exam only for vocational college admission. The Spring CEE is also academically oriented, but less demanding than the real CEE that is sat in the summer. This section presents the students' high-school experiences and their encounters with their teachers.

Vignette 3: Xiaoxin
Xiaoxin is a 22-year-old young man in his second year of a cost engineering programme at Riverside. His hometown is located in the outskirts of Tianjin. His mother is a nurse and his father ran off when he was a kid, leaving a huge amount of debt for his mother to pay. His primary and secondary schooling years were plagued by constant family troubles. He was too embarrassed to make his teachers aware of his situation. He always thought he was "slower" than the other students and he felt bad about making his mother worry about his poor grades as she already had too much on her plate. He failed to get into a prestigious "key" high school and went to a local one instead. At this local high school, Xiaoxin's grades were not ideal. His teachers strongly suggested that he take the easier Spring CEE to enrol at a vocational college. Xiaoxin was afraid that his poor test scores may result in him having no college to go to at all. Therefore, he took his teachers' advice and took the Spring CEE. He was accepted by Riverside for the following year. Back in his high school classroom to complete the final year of high school, he began to realise that his teachers were not that happy to see him in class anymore. He and other soon-to-be vocational college students were advised to go home so that the remaining students who were working towards the real CEE would not be disturbed. Xiaoxin was quite happy about being admitted to Riverside, as he knew that the real CEE would be too difficult for him.

As can be seen in the vignette, Xiaoxin was treated as an outsider in his high school after being admitted to a vocational college. It was clear that his teachers had already established a "break" between those who were worth investing in and those who were not through the

separation, the differentiation, and the exile. With his "vocational college student status", Xiaoxin was considered unsuitable or even a threat to the CEE preparation classroom. His behaviour was considered potentially disturbing by his teachers only because he did not have the expected test scores and had been tracked to the "second choice" option (i.e. vocational college). He and his classmates were constantly reminded by their teachers of the inferiority of this choice. For example, Xiaoxin spoke of how his teachers "encouraged" him to try harder:

> Xiaoxin: Actually, I felt extremely relieved when I found out I could get into Riverside because my high school teachers always told me that my grades were so bad that *even* a vocational college would not take me. I know they wanted me to work harder by threatening me this way. But I was so worried and scared. I simply could not be without a college to go to. So, I took the Spring CEE and got into a vocational college as soon as possible. (Riverside)

The fear that '*even* a vocational college would not take me' accompanied students like Xiaoxin throughout their three years of high school. Despite knowing that going to vocational college was the last resort, Xiaoxin was still happy with it as he 'simply could not be without a college to go to'. It was obvious that the desires and fears that built up during their entire secondary schooling were overpowering. Xiaoxin was the only student I encountered who had taken the Spring CEE to enrol in vocational colleges. Others, however, had also been "encouraged" by their teachers to aim for higher-tier universities. Yuehan, Yifan and a few other students stated that their high school teachers 'did not expect them to go to vocational colleges', 'thought they would go to second-tier universities in the worst scenario' or suggested they retake the CEE to achieve a better outcome. In their high-school years, the students were expected to conform to the academically focused values and to strive to achieve the best test scores. However, even at their vocational colleges, the students could still not escape. Chapter 5 highlighted the academic influences on the curriculum, pedagogy and other aspects of their vocational learning experience. The beginning of this chapter also presents the vocational teaching staff's perceptions of their students, and these may constitute another possible way in which stereotypes are constructed.

The elements captured above regarding the academically focused societal attitudes (i.e. parents' high academic expectations, high school classrooms designed for CEE preparation, and the views of vocational college staff) all contribute to the formation of the stereotype. It was these very attitudes that constructed the dominant stereotypes against vocational

students. As can be seen in the findings, the students themselves had already internalised some of the perceived stereotypical views. As a result, they felt inferior and ashamed about being vocational students. Applying the logic of meritocracy to their situations, they realised they were supposed to be responsible for their own test scores and exam performance. Therefore, they placed the blame on themselves.

7.6 Taking the blame

Accepting that the system is seemingly fair and just, the majority of the students I encountered tended to accept the blame for their situations. In their view, it was their own limitations or shortcomings that led to them being relegated to vocational colleges. They were most likely the ones to blame for any lack of success, either through a lack of intelligence or hard work at high school, or a failure to be visionaries, or a lack of planning and management. When the young people in my study were asked about their perspectives of the stereotype and the tracking system, a large number of them invariably referred to their being stereotyped as a result of their individual "failures". They talked with resignation and regret about what they thought they could have done better. The students also mentioned that they had to 'pay the price' for their "failures". For example, at Riverside, Tai shared her view:

> Int: What do you think of these prevalent attitudes in society?
> Tai: Actually, I think it is pretty fair because I did not work hard enough in the past.
> Int: Work hard enough?
> Tai: In the same period of time [secondary school], they [the academic students] put in much more effort than we did. They deserve to have an academic degree, which leads to more career options. But for me, I did not work as hard back then. So, I need to take my time and pay for this. I know it was my fault. (Riverside)

Tai was not the only student holding this view. In the focus group sessions conducted in both colleges, most students held a similar view to Tai's:

> Int: What do you think of our exam system and the negative attitudes against us that it has brought?
> Qihan: I think it is fair enough. I guess there is no better way than exams to judge who is better than whom.

Yuwei: It is very normal that they [the academic students] have better chances than us. They studied hard and didn't play all the time. They deserve better futures. (Seaside)

Int: Do you think this [exam system] is fair?

Hai: Yes. Why is it not fair?

Ran: It dates back to the Imperial Exam in ancient times. It has always been like this.

Cheng: This was your choice, wasn't it? It is you choosing not to study hard in high school. You didn't study hard, so here you are.

Ran: I feel like it is fate.

Cheng: Yes. It is the rule of society. You cannot do anything about it. (Riverside)

The young people saw their stereotyped position in society as the outcome of their own "choices", as each individual student was responsible for their own test performance. It was considered 'very normal' that the academic students may have better future prospects than these students would as they had chosen 'not to study hard' in the past. The fact that the meritocratic tradition dates back to the Imperial Exam also normalised this attitude. Applying the logic of meritocracy, the students tended to see their current "failure" as the result of their own shortcomings and weaknesses. Yifan, for example, admitted that she was responsible for her own 'evil deeds':

Yifan: I didn't manage to test well at the CEE. I know why I didn't test well, I must have indulged myself too much when I shouldn't. When I think about that, I realise that there is a saying: 'One always becomes the victim of one's own evil deeds' [one has oneself to blame]. [...]So, after all that, I came here. I think I am the kind of person that just gets stage fright so easily. I may always be well-prepared, but I always fail at key moments. My mom said that's about it for me, I may never amount to anything [not get anywhere]. [Laughs] (Riverside)

Similar to Yifan's confession of her 'self-indulgence' and comments about 'stage fright', Xiaoxin also found a way to attribute the problems to himself:

Xiaoxin: I know I have always been slower than others and sometimes just drifted along back in high school. Those who worked hard deserved to go to good universities. But for us, vocational students, we deserve what we have got now. It is all down to you, isn't it? You asked for it. Because everyone should have been studying and trying

hard back then, but you did not. So, you get yourself into this place and you need to make more effort than others now. (Riverside)

Not only did the students feel that their inadequate intelligence or insufficient diligence placed them in a disadvantaged position, but they also realised they should have planned or managed their careers more and been more "calculating" or "enterprising". For example, Xiu thought that her limited way of thinking contributed to her failure to form clear career goals.

Xiu: I guess I have never been very visionary. I have always been limited and lacked an awareness of career-planning. That may be the reason I feel so lost and do not know what jobs to get into. (Seaside)

The students tended to blame themselves for being channelled into vocational colleges. Thus, the structural constraints on the students and their futures had become invisible. The consequences of institutional risks came to be viewed as the results of individual decision making: 'this was your choice', as Cheng stated.

7.7 Systemic error: retargeting the blame

However, one student among the 36 participants of the qualitative sample did in fact perceive the system as being unfair. She refused to take the blame for her so-called failure in the ways that her peers did. She insightfully reported the problems she noticed in the current exam-focused system and the lack of support for long-term skill development and career planning. She pointed out:

Jia: I think the first problem is that there is not much connection between what we have been learning and what our careers will be now. For example, we studied advanced maths in high school for years. But now we are no longer required to take it as we are English majors. All that hard work and time invested in the past was all for a piece of paper at the CEE exam. The whole point of studying was just to take the exam on that day? I felt that it was such a waste. If we had had some sort of career planning at an early stage, the stuff we learned could be further developed in college. College should be a place to let us put stuff in practice or explore different options. I think it is more important to gain this awareness of career planning and path finding than simply just knowing how to prepare for exams. It should be done as early as

possible. But now, we are left to search for our own paths after college. That should be the time when our careers take off the ground. But we will still spend lots of time searching. Perhaps we might never find our paths. (Seaside)

It is clear that Jia was questioning the meaning or aim of her whole educational experience over the years. At the same time, she observed the lack of coordination between what she had been learning in college and what would be needed to develop a career in the workplace. Jia's comments regarding the lack of support in career planning at an earlier stage mirrored Xiu and Guanglu's observations in Section 4.8, where they explained how lost they felt when trying to choose a programme of study as they had been so focused on preparing exams in high school that they had had no time for career planning.

Jia commented further on the arbitrariness of the exam system:

Jia: All the expectations and hard work were dependent on this piece of paper [CEE exam]. It could involve so many uncertainties. What if I got sick or I got really nervous? What if something unpredictable happened that contributed to my bad performance on the exam day, but I was actually really good? Some people would say: 'It's fate'. It's not fate at all. Because I do not think things should be evaluated like that, just by test scores in one exam. It should be assessed on our level of skills-based competence throughout the school year. (Seaside)

Vocational college students experienced stereotyping in their everyday lives, and this was produced by the mainstream societal sentiments and attitudes. The students internalised these stereotypes and felt inferior and ashamed for being vocational students. Although one of them reported the flaws in the current system, the majority of the students actively took the blame for what they considered were their faults or failures, as the system, as they perceived it, was essentially meritocratic.

7.8 Summary
The findings outlined in this chapter illustrate what underpins the negative stereotyping of vocational students and shed light on the students' experiences of being subjected to the prevalent stereotypes. The college teaching staff held certain images of a "vocational student identity", which included perceptions of their behaviours as being "deviant" and inferior.

Vocational students were seen by the staff as being 'bad seeds' and naturally unmotivated. The students also reported their own experiences of being subjected to comments from their local community and the public at large like 'spoiled rich kid' 'degree-purchasing' (at the private college), 'lazy' and 'low quality'. However, when talking about the very system that assigned them to the "under-performing" track, a large percentage of the students in the sample believed the current system to be meritocratic. They seemed to have internalised the stereotypes they saw in the society and regarded themselves as lacking all the necessary "merits" to achieve excellent academic performance: diligence, intelligence, and motivation. By constantly comparing themselves with academic students, the students were left feeling inadequate and ashamed of being at vocational college. The findings also present vignettes of three students' life stories, which demonstrate how they negotiate their choices within the context of powerful academically focused societal sentiments and attitudes. Moreover, in their views, it was their own limitations or shortcomings that caused them to be relegated to vocational college and a possibly dubious future. Most of the students attributed their being stereotyped to their individual failures, with only one student insightfully retargeting the blame to the systemic errors.

7.9 Discussion

This chapter has provided evidence in a bid to address Research Question 5: How do vocational education students see themselves compared with those following academic routes? The discussion of the findings in this chapter will utilise Foucault's ideas of disciplinary power and examination (Foucault, 1977), Gramsci's concept of hegemony (1971), and the work of individualisation theorist Zygmunt Bauman (2007c) (See Chapter 8). The students were perceived by the staff in terms of unitary characteristics, a categorical identification that became a pejorative label (Ball, 1981). The stereotypical "vocational student identity" provides a framework within which the students had to negotiate their social identity in the college. This imposed an important constraint upon the range of possible social identities available to them (Ball, 1981, p. 38). Being a "smart and hard-working student" was an identity that was not normally available to the vocational students. Therefore, they tended to see themselves as less diligent, intelligent, and motivated youths. Raised with family expectations of high academic achievement and trained in an exam-focused secondary education system, the students had to move to 'an optimum' of action, which 'hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the "nature" of the individual' (Foucault, 1977, p. 183). Constantly being compared and comparing themselves with academic students, they turned 'the gaze' upon themselves to see if they 'added up'; they

learned and audited themselves, strived to live up to 'perfection codes', and self-confess through the academically focused discourse (Rose, 1996). Their belief in the meritocracy of the system and attributing of the blame to themselves could be seen as a way of submitting their consent to the hegemonic rule. Acknowledging themselves to be inferior is the result of 'the salt of personal guilt being rubbed into the wound left by socially produced impotence' (Bauman, 2007c, p. 58). The young people actively took responsibility for their failures or 'bad' choices (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Ball et al., 2000), rather than seeing themselves as the victims of an academically focused hierarchical education system.

The preceding four chapters (Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7) have presented the findings of this study—the "past", "present", and the "future" of the vocational youth, as well as some insights into stereotyping in Chinese society.

The next chapter will discuss the findings informed by the theoretical framework and the relevant literature.

Chapter 8 DISCUSSION

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has examined the lived experiences of students at two vocational colleges in China. Utilising the theoretical framework created for this study (see Figure 2.1), this chapter provides an extended discussion linking the relevant literature and theoretical perspectives with the research findings presented in the previous chapters in order to further address the research questions of the study:

How are young people in China exercising "personal agency" in their educational and career choices within the existing social and educational structure?

1. What are students' experiences of choosing a vocational college and programme?

2. How do young people experience attending vocational college and what are their perspectives on the vocational programmes as preparation for the world of work?

3. What are vocational students' perspectives of their future career possibilities?

4. How do vocational students compare themselves with those following academic routes?

5. In what ways does social theory help us explain the impact of the economic/social structure on the experiences of young people in vocational colleges?

The chapter begins with a brief summary of the major findings presented in the previous chapters. Using the above research questions as a framework, the chapter contributes to the critique and discussion of the major theoretical perspectives (see theoretical framework as presented in Figure 2.1 in Section 2.3) and the relevant literature in light of the findings from this study. The discussion is informed by the individualisation thesis (Beck, 1996; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), particularly Bauman's work on it (2001, 2007c), Foucault's theory of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977), and Gramsci's idea of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). It is also informed by previous research on Chinese vocational education (Luo, 2013; Woronov, 2015; Stewart, 2015; Klorer and Stepan, 2015; Koo, 2016; Yi et al, 2018), together with some classic works in the West on streaming and banding students in schools (Hargreaves, 1967; Willis, 1977; Ball, 1981). I also draw on research on skills ecosystems (Buchanan et al, 2009), young people's opportunities in the labour market (Ding, 2004; Keep and Mayhew, 2004; Keep, 2006; Hu, 2013), and their career decision-making (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2008).

The research findings of this thesis firstly reveal the stress the vocational students were facing when preparing for the College Entrance Exam (CEE) and the guilt and frustration they experienced when they were "dropped down" to vocational colleges. They had to learn to be strategic and place their "bets" wisely as part of an unpredictable academic gamble aimed at maximising their chances of accessing post-secondary education, even if it meant they had to accept programmes in which they were less interested (see Chapter 4). The findings also demonstrate various issues within the vocational programmes, like academicised curricula with weak connections to the world of work, didactic and disengaging teaching methods, and a lack of a proper assessment system. Those problems may have contributed to the students having a 'passing time' or 'getting by' attitude towards their courses. The level of support they received from the staff during their learning experiences varied greatly between the two colleges. However, students from both colleges reported feeling unsupported in terms of careers advice and guidance (see Chapter 5). The students' perceptions of the job market and their career plans were also investigated. Some students perceived a ceiling effect that constrained their career options as they worried that their vocational degrees would be considered inferior to academic ones. However, others believed finding a suitable job was down to an individual's capabilities and personal achievements rather than to external factors. The findings also show a lack of confidence in their skills preparation among the vocational students, a disturbingly large proportion of whom (25% at Riverside; 18% at Seaside) had problems forming their career plans. Some students tended to passively accept whatever available jobs were on the table rather than consciously making a choice (see Chapter 6). Moreover, the vocational students experienced stereotyping at their colleges and from the public at large. Most of the students attributed their relegation to vocational college and their being stereotyped to their own limitations or shortcomings, as they believed in the meritocratic system (see Chapter 7).

The findings will be discussed in the next few sections to address the above research questions.

8.2 Making a "choice"

This section sets out to discuss how the education and career choices were made by Chinese vocational youth (Research Question 1 and Research Question 3). Drawing on Beck's individualisation thesis together with the Marxist notion of false consciousness, it also addresses Question 5: How does social theory help us explain the connection between the economic/social structure and the experiences of young people in vocational colleges?

Informed by these two theoretical perspectives, the discussion aims to achieve a nuanced understanding of contemporary Chinese society and post-secondary education. The individualisation thesis provides new insights into the changing relationships between individual young people and institutions in late modern society (Woodman and Wyn, 2014), whilst the Marxist perspective offers the notion of false consciousness as an 'illusion of control' (Jost, 1995), manufactured for those who would soon join the young labour force.

8.2.1 The risk biography

In some ways, the current project constitutes an attempt to empirically verify the existence of individualisation processes in young people's everyday lives in Chinese vocational education. If 'individualisation' is defined as the process of internalising institutions into the individual biography (Beck, 1992), and taking 'increasing responsibility for the risk of failure in this process' (Wallace and Cross, 1990, p. 5), then there does seem to be evidence that young people in Chinese vocational colleges are experiencing such a process. When making the "choice" to enter vocational colleges, the students were left alone to negotiate their place within a highly competitive education system. They had worked hard to prepare for their exams and had experienced immense pressure and fear throughout their secondary education. Chinese students are assigned the responsibility of investing their time appropriately and planning correctly for their futures.

As the findings in Chapter 4 suggest, the students were "dropped down" to vocational colleges as they had achieved lower CEE scores (Section 4.4). They learned to be highly strategic in choosing their vocational programmes, as a slight oversight or miscalculation may have left them with no college at all to go to (Section 4.6). As student Xiaoxin noted, he could not be 'the chooser' here and the best thing to do was to 'stay away' from the 'popular majors' (see Section 4.6). The students were required to calculate their chances by considering their choices in relation to factors like a programme's popularity and capacity, as these indicate the probability of the students' getting admitted. The admission process is a legitimised and institutionalised form of 'academic gambling' (Liu, 2016, p. 98). Once they had learned that their CEE scores were below the cut-off lines, students such as Jiahui had to 'stare at the list on the screen', trying to spot and apply for any available programme. It was found that 21% of all the participants were willing to accept programmes that they were less interested in simply because these programmes were the only "leftover options" that would grant them admission to colleges (see Table 4.2). The students were compelled to 'choose' within an 'institutionally structured risk environment' (Giddens, 1991). They

were responsible for resolving their 'quandaries generated by vexingly volatile and constantly changing circumstances', and they bore 'in full the consequences of their choices' (Bauman, 2007, p. 11).

The findings reported in Chapter 6 relating to the young people's future career "choices" also demonstrate a process of individualisation. To the question: "To what extent do you think success in finding a job depends upon the individual?", approximately half of the respondents expressed the opinion that it was very much down to the individual, rather than to external factors. Despite facing a possible ceiling effect brought about by their vocational degrees, the students believed that their individual capabilities or personal achievements were more important and relevant to their success in obtaining employment than the kind of degree they held. The students typically expressed such opinions as 'the chances are all down to ourselves' and it is 'all up to an individual's competence' in both the questionnaire and interviews. As Bauman (2001) points out, 'The present-day uncertainty is a powerful individualizing force' (p. 24). The vagaries of commodity and labour markets inspire and promote division, not unity, which puts a premium on competitive attitudes (Bauman, 2001, p. 24). By placing the emphasis on individuality, the students are indicating a belief that the individual must take on most of the responsibility for his or her transition to work and be fully equipped for the competition. All of the fears, anxieties and grievances imposed on these young people by the labour market are designed in such a way as to be suffered alone.

As can be seen in Chapter 4, approximately 42% of the students had changed their views or wishes about the job or profession they would like to take up since choosing to go to vocational college (see Table 4.3). When it comes to job hunting, they still needed to adjust to the needs of the labour market and learn to be 'flexible workers' (Woronov, 2015, p. 132), as very few of them could secure jobs within the industry of their training (see Section 6.6.1). It would seem impossible for the vocational students to consider long-term careers at that stage, as they needed to be flexible, 'ready to change tactics and style at short notice', and pursue 'opportunities according to their current availability, rather than following one's own established preferences' (Bauman, 2007c, p. 11). 'Individual lives were splicing into a series of short-term projects and episodes, in which concepts like "career" or "progress" would never be meaningfully applied' (Bauman, 2007c, p. 10). The individualisation of these vocational youths is a compulsion 'to create, to stage manage […] amid changing preferences and at successive stages of life, while constantly adapting to the conditions of the labour market, the education system and so on' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 4).

In Sections 4.8, 5.6.2 and 6.5, the findings indicate that there was a lack of adequate careers guidance in secondary schools for students when they were "choosing" their educational and career paths. According to the students, the secondary schools saw getting them through the CEE (Section 4.8) as their main task. The students lacked a sense of direction and felt uninformed during an important decision-making period in their lives (Section 4.8). They experienced a similar problem in the vocational colleges, where the career services were either inaccessible or unhelpful for the students (Section 5.6.2). They were left alone to make their plans within an extremely precarious environment. Since the neoliberal economic reforms from the end of the 1970s, the system of state-guaranteed job security was transformed into a market-oriented employment sector (Zhang et al., 2002). A person's career is no longer defined by the state as an individual's contribution to communism and social improvement (Zhang et al., 2002). Young people in China are increasingly required to navigate their way as individuals within the limits set out by the market and they have to decide where to go and what to do (Hoffman, 2010, p. 115). In a time of ambivalence and uncertainty, they are now being encouraged to seek out 'biographical solutions without being equipped with the power and guidance to do so' (Bauman, 2007c, pp. 1-4). There are no 'authoritatively endorsed recipes which would allow errors to be avoided if they were properly learned and dutifully followed', yet it is the individual's lot and duty to pay the price for any mistakes (Bauman, 2007c, p. 11). The combined forces of individual responsibility and accountability, on the one hand, and vulnerability and lack of control, on the other, lead to a heightened sense of risk and insecurity (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). As the students were constantly confronted with risks, they were therefore concerned with eliminating these risks. Their 'do-it-yourself biographies' are always 'risk biographies', a 'state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment' (Beck, 1996, p. 25). (See Section 8.4.2 for a more detailed discussion on making career plans).

8.2.2 The illusion of control

The findings suggest that, rather than due to interest, vocational colleges or programmes were chosen as the last resort or "leftover option" in a bid to obtain an educational credential. The students' lower test scores in the College Entrance Exam (CEE) automatically limited their capacity to be "free choosers". As Hai acknowledged, 'There weren't any other options for me except vocational colleges. There was nothing I could do. So here I am' (Section 4.4). Almost all of the students in the study wished they had attained a better grade so that they could have enrolled at higher tier universities. The findings reveal the students' and their

families' eagerness to participate in post-secondary education even if it meant they would be on the vocational track. In order to 'get into college', students such as Xiaoxin were willing to accept programmes which they had little interest in. They had to eventually learn to 'come to term with it' (Section 4.7). It shows their strong commitment to human capital investment—only through investment in further education would they be able to develop embodied human capital and be selected for high-income and high-status jobs in the growing economy (Anagnost, 2013; Koo, 2016). Better credentials were believed to lead to good jobs and higher rewards, while, at the same time, offering an efficient and fair means of selection based on individual achievement. Credentials are the currency of opportunity (Brown, 2003). The students were encouraged to do their best and strive for excellence. However, they cannot all be the best. The students' CEE scores were compared with every other high school pupil's CEE performance, which were used to establish cut-off lines. Therefore, their immense efforts in CEE preparation and their "choices" or "decisions" to go to vocational college upon leaving secondary education were passive responses to the ever-increasing demand for educational credentials. (This demand will be further discussed in Section 8.4 within the current labour market context.) The students and their families preferred to enter the job market with a vocational credential rather than no degree at all (Hansen and Woronov, 2013). This finding is generally consistent with that of previous research which also indicates that vocational studies were chosen by default or as a last resort (Zhang, 2008; Hansen and Woronov, 2013; Luo, 2013; Woronov 2015).

Their desires to gain better credentials and their belief that more effort equals better credentials, which equals better lives, all highlight the false consciousness that these young people harboured. The reality is that even making extraordinary efforts to improve one's test scores would count for little if everyone else did the same or better. There is never a guaranteed better life as individuals' opportunities depend on 'the opportunities of others' (Brown, 2003). This false consciousness successfully kept students and their families in the competition for better schools, colleges and jobs, with few of them able to opt out (Brown, 2003, p. 142), especially within the 'risk' culture of global capitalism (Beck, 1992). A false consciousness is created by manufacturing the illusion that these young people could decide or have control over their CEE results by using 'proper test skills', putting in 'enough effort', or having a better 'school brain'. There is an 'illusion of control' when they participate in the determining process even when institutions are producing unfavourable outcomes for them (Lind and Tyler, 1988; Taylor and Brown, 1988). As Guoshuai said, 'If you were hard-working and diligent enough, you would definitely get the results you want' (Section 7.4.1). Similarly, Jiren felt that 'if I knew how to take tests, I could score high enough to get into a

better college' (Section 4.3). 'It is you who chooses not to study hard' (Section 7.6). The students believed they had the capacity to choose or control their test results, which in turn led to their own post-secondary outcomes. What they did not realise is that their efforts to achieve better test scores were less relevant in determining their outcomes than the "cut-off lines" set by the Government. There will always be a certain percentage of young people who fail this exam no matter how hard any individual student prepares for the CEE.

8.3 Inside the vocational colleges

The study has investigated the students' learning experiences in two vocational colleges and how useful and relevant the students consider their programmes to be (Research Question 2). The discussion is informed by the relevant literature on vocational education and skills formation, as well as by the Marxist political economy perspective. The political economy perspective offers a conceptualisation of the roots of the political positioning of young people in neoliberal economies with respect to their skills training, labour-force participation, and the ideological justification of their exploitation (Côté, 2014a, p. 538).

8.3.1 The college experience

The students shared their own perspectives of their colleges' curricula, pedagogy, assessment, and college support, as well as their internship experiences. In terms of curriculum content, over 60% of the participants rated it favourably. However, more than a fifth of the student sample at Riverside expressed their dissatisfaction with the curriculum, whereas only a tenth did so at Seaside. For certain programmes at Riverside (especially at the satellite campus), the students complained about the amount of theoretical or academic input and about the incomprehensibility of their courses. They had 'too much textbook stuff' (see Section 5.2). These complaints are in line with the findings of existing research (Zhang, 2009; Shi, 2013; Woronov, 2015). They attest to the trend of 'devocationalisation'— intended to 'make vocational education classes more academic and less focused on vocational training' (Woronov, 2015, p. 76) and to the 'academic drift' (Edwards and Miller, 2008, p. 130) in the vocational education curriculum. Devocationalisation leaves a vacuum at the centre of the students' education—where skills development should occur, the students were learning little of any practical use (Woronov, 2015, p. 79). The vocational colleges themselves face the dilemma of having to follow the compulsory curriculum set by the National Higher Education Bureau (NHEB) while at the same time offering vocational courses "on the side". According to the teaching staff at Seaside, vocationally oriented courses can only be provided to the students as an addition to the compulsory curriculum set by the NHEB (see Section 5.2.3). This dilemma, demonstrated in the findings, also proves

Luo's point that the poorly structured educational system leaves vocational colleges dependent on higher education (Luo, 2013). The performance of vocational colleges was completely aligned with that of higher education, thereby obscuring the particular distinguishing features of vocational colleges (Luo, 2013). Despite being constrained by the top-down academically focused educational policy, the colleges were expected to produce vocational graduates.

As for the standard of teaching, almost one in five students was dissatisfied with it at Riverside, while only 8% of Seaside students felt the same way about theirs. Comparing with the publicly funded Riverside, the private Seaside College provides better training quality and greater support for the students. In Riverside, the students reported that their teachers used a didactic and lecture-based way of teaching in their classes, with limited student participation and engagement (see Section 5.2). In classes, the teachers 'just read stuff out of the textbook' and distanced themselves from their students. There was also a lack of proper assessment (see Section 5.3). The findings accord with what Woronov found in vocational schools during her ethnographic research (2015). Learners cannot construct knowledge merely through didactic teaching. Instead, they need to be engaged intentionally and effortfully, which requires pedagogic processes that position learners as meaning makers (Billet, 2011, p. 246). The findings in this study show that the disengaging way of teaching and poor assessment methods in the vocational colleges left the students feeling frustrated and unmotivated in the classroom. These young people were marginalised in their own meaning-making process. In their research on the quality of training at Chinese vocational schools, Yi et al. (2018) point out that one of the reasons why the quality of vocational education is so low in China is that, unlike other areas of schooling in China, there is little assessment and, therefore, little accountability in the vocational sector. There are few clear minimum standards for vocational colleges in terms of equipment, teaching standards, and so on. While some national guidelines do exist, the performance of teachers and administrators in vocational institutions are rarely evaluated against those guidelines (Kuczera and Field, 2012).

8.3.2 'Vacuum' in the learning experience

The findings in Chapter 5 demonstrated there was a prevalent attitude of trying to 'get by' in class or to 'get their college years over with' among the students. They developed various strategies to 'pass time' in class, such as sleeping, playing on their phones or laptops, chatting with friends, or just walking off to play video games. When their phones were taken away, they just 'stared at the teacher in a daze or played with their fingers' (Section 5.5).

Their unsatisfactory learning experiences in class created a 'vacuum' in their student lives (Woronov, 2015).

Paul Willis's findings on anti-school culture and behaviour in his classic UK-based study *Learning to Labour* offer some useful insights here. The anti-school culture among the 'lads' can be seen as 'entrenched general and personalised opposition to "authority"' (Willis, 1977, p.11). Similar to Willis' analysis of the oppositional anti-school culture, Lacey concludes that a sub-culture could be formed through 'polarisation' when the school-dominated, normative culture is opposed by an alternative culture. The behaviour of pupils within sub-cultural groups presents a challenge to the normative school culture. In these two Chinese vocational colleges, however, the behaviour of these students was not a result of the kind of anti-school family or working-class culture that Willis describes in his work, nor was it a challenge to the normative culture, as in Lacey's study. As the findings indicated in Chapter 7, the majority of the students believed in the meritocracy of the system and in the importance of gaining credentials for social mobility (Section 7.4). Therefore, the students' 'getting by' in Chinese vocational classrooms was not a 'form of accommodation to working-class futures', as was the case with the 'lads' in Willis' study. Instead, they were dissatisfied and frustrated because of the insufficient training and supervision they received, as illustrated by complaints such as 'the teachers indulge us too much' and 'the teachers will turn a blind eye' at exams. Instead of opposing a normative school culture, the students in fact wished to perform well in class, to be disciplined by their teachers, and to be expected to achieve better (see Section 5.4.2). This reveals their internalisation, rather than their rejection, of the examination-oriented school values (Ling, 2015, p. 127). 'Sleeping it off' or playing with phones through class seems less like resistance than a reasoned response to their educational situation (Woronov, 2015, p. 87). For vocational students, their inattentive behaviours could be a result of their non-productive learning experiences and the manifestation of the coping strategies they developed to 'deflect attention away from dissatisfaction' (Hodkinson et al., 1996).

This sense of a vacuum among the students was also observed by David Slater (2010) in working-class Japanese high schools. In his analysis, he viewed this problem as the 'virtual meaninglessness' of the school, 'leaving working-class high schools without any coherent centre' (2010, p. 155). Between their academicised curricular content, their disengaging ways of teaching, and their lack of exams that matter, the vocational colleges may have lost

their coherent centre, which led to the students' attitudes of simply 'passing time' and playing their college years away.

8.3.3 Preparing 'alienated labour'

Bowles and Gintis hold that schooling fosters and rewards the development of certain capacities and the expression of certain needs, while thwarting and penalising others. Through these institutional relationships, the educational system tailors individuals' self-concepts, aspirations, and social class identifications to the requirements of the social division of labour (2011, p. 129). According to their 'correspondence principle', the social relationships of education replicate the hierarchical division of labour (2011). The characteristics of 'alienated labour' (2011, p. 131) are reflected in the apparent "vacuum" that I observed in these students' learning experiences and in their lack of control over their own studies, their alienation from the curriculum content, and their consequent 'get by' attitudes. These students constitute the potential labour force that will be expected to fill job positions that are relatively low-paying and highly insecure, boring and oppressive (see Chapter 6). They represent the archetype of alienated labour (Bowles and Gintis, 2011, p. 73). By attuning young people to a set of social relationships similar to those of the workplace, schooling attempts to prepare them for a future of alienated labour.

This kind of training was also encountered in their internship experiences. As the findings indicate, internship positions offering rewarding, valuable and educational experiences were largely unavailable and inaccessible to most of the students. Instead, the majority of the internship experiences were filled with mundane, monotonous and basic tasks (see Section 5.7). This finding is largely consistent with what Koo and Yi et al. found in their research. In Yi et al.'s (2018) study, 68.2% of the students reported that their internships appeared to lack a clear educational purpose. Koo's (2016) study found that in their "internships", vocational students were used as unskilled and cheap labour in factories and formed a supply of labour for the Chinese export-driven economy, feeding the needs of neoliberalism.

8.3.4 Usefulness and relevance to work

One of the aims of this study is to find out how useful and relevant the students considered their vocational programmes to be in preparing them for the world of work—i.e. how "vocational" they thought their programmes were. When commenting on the relevance of their vocational courses to the world of work, some complained about the lack of hands-on work experience and failed to see how their curricula related to the world of work. One-third

of the student population at Riverside did not have access to training workshops or equipment, and there was no hands-on practical component due to the lack of available facilities. Even though vocationally oriented courses, like IT skills training, were provided by Seaside, they are still "add-on" courses to the compulsory curriculum stipulated by the National Higher Education Bureau. The students had to sit through the 'torturous' classes filled with dense academic content (see Section 5.2). In general, the students from the privately funded Seaside College commented more favourably about the vocationalism of their courses than those of the public college involved in the study. However, the focus group discussion at Seaside on their understanding of "vocational education/courses" (see Section 5.2.2) shed light on the weak connections between their vocational curricula and the real world of work, which led to the young people's inability to link what they learned with what jobs they might do in the future. This left them unable to develop a set of vocational aspirations from their learning experiences. The situation revealed here generally aligns with the evidence presented in previous research (Klorer and Stepan, 2015; Stewart, 2015; Woronov, 2015).

When analysing how work and education are connected in the Australian context, Buchanan et al. (2009) refer to Finegold's analytical tradition of a skills ecosystem (Finegold, 1999) to address a concern with coordination failures (i.e. not just market and /or government failure). The key dynamic of interest embedded in the skills ecosystem is the balance between development (formation of a person's capability) and deployment (the performance of work on the job). Buchanan et al. (2017) found that in Australia, technical education colleges were accused of providing skills that were not considered important—not what 'industry needed'. The problem was the lack of coordination between development and deployment—the highly disaggregated specifications of tasks or 'competency standards', which missed the point of how work is evolving (Buchanan et al., 2009). Despite experiencing different kinds of problems in vocational training, the Chinese system also suffers from discoordination within the skills system (Stewart, 2015; Klorer and Stepan, 2015). As suggested in the findings of this study, due to the academicised curriculum and the lack of training facilities, the students had a hard time associating their course work with the real performance of work on the job. It appears that the current learning flows within vocational colleges involve a high level of fragmentation, which may lead to persistent skills mismatches (Buchanan et al., 2009). The outcome of poorly coordinated flows of learning and labour would be fewer effective pathways for students and workers that link educational and occupational progression and which progress them towards the vision of lifelong learning (Buchanan et al., 2009). The idea of a skills ecosystem highlights the way in which different groups of

actors—individuals, educators, employers and policy advisors—must be motivated by mutually reinforcing advantages for a high skills ecosystem to flourish (Dalziel, 2015).

Moreover, Rong's account of her internship (Section 5.7.3) demonstrates that the credentials/qualifications failed to reflect the actual skills required to carry out the work, thus concurring with the findings of Livingstone et al. (Livingstone, 1998; 2002; Livingstone and Wilson, 2009). This also indicates a detrimental situation in Chinese vocational education, as vocational certificates and diplomas are exam-based and the existing five levels of skills standards are only for high-demand, low-skill occupations (Stewart, 2015). What is more, according to Xiaoxin (Section 6.6.3), the vocational qualifications he and his classmates obtained were of little value as they had learned no actual skills. Other researchers have also identified this problem in the Chinese qualification system. Liu and Su found that numerous qualifications appeared for one specific type of work, as the whole system has been marketised and many organisations wished to make money out of their qualifications. This serves to devalue and discredit all the qualifications on the market (Liu and Su, 2016). Shi (2013) points out that the increased number of qualification types, their decreased value, and their outdatedness in relation to frontline production are all destructive to the Chinese vocational education system (2013, p. 20). The Chinese vocational education system is in need of a skills-based industry-driven occupational standards and qualifications framework that provides a means for establishing quality and consistency across institutions, as well as connections to skill performance at the workplace (Shi, 2013; Stewart, 2015).

As China aims to become an 'industrial superpower', initiatives like Made in China 2025 and the recent Supply-Side Structural Reform have been put forward to develop a highly skilled workforce (State Council, 2015; 2017). The urgent need to enhance the alignment of vocational education with the needs of industry has been acknowledged by the Government, which intends to establish an advanced, employer-driven vocational training system, as the recent *Guidelines* indicate (State Council, 2018). However, at the time of writing, it is apparent from the findings and from the above discussion that the current unfragmented flows of learning and labour within the Chinese system have not been significantly reformed.

8.4 Future career possibilities

This section discusses the students' perspectives of their future career possibilities (Research Question 3), utilising relevant literature and theories on the relationship between educational

credentials and labour market outcomes. Hodkinson's (2008) theory of careership also informs the discussion of the career decision-making among Chinese vocational youth.

8.4.1 At the back of the queue

As indicated in the findings (Chapter 7), some young people in the study believed that their vocational degrees may be considered inferior to academic ones. The reason for them forming this perception is that they had directly or indirectly witnessed the constrained job opportunities or decreased wages available for vocational graduates. They thought that the degrees people hold are 'the stepping stone to the world of work' (see Section 6.2). According to labour market signalling mechanisms, employers' demands are transmitted back, via incentives and signals, to individuals, who then structure their choices in response (Ehrenberg and Smith, 2000). The incentives referred to here might include the increased wages or greater likelihood of employment that accrue to those with the desired skills or qualification types and levels (Johnson and Burden, 2003; Keep and Mayhew, 2004). Through such signalling mechanisms, young people gain a view of what the labour market will and will not reward in terms of certain types or levels of qualification. It appeared from their accounts (e.g. Zehua in Section 6.2) that the vocational students had received the signal from the labour market that their level of qualification may not be well-rewarded or 'open more and better doors'. They acknowledged the different employment outcomes and occupational progression that different 'stepping stones' bring.

As student Tao indicated in Section 6.2, at his uncle's workplace (a governmental institution), they 'would go straight to the first or second tier university graduates', while the vocational graduates were located at the bottom with less likelihood of employment. Qualifications are the main factor determining the distribution of employment opportunities. According to the 'job-competition mode' developed by Thurow (1975), new entrants are ranked in a labour queue competing for a particular job, with those who indicate the lowest training costs ranking at the top. Individual potential or trainability, as signalled by the level of educational achievement, creates a hierarchy of academic worth (Di Stasio, 2014, p. 796). As Woronov (2015) observes, vocational degrees may indicate less human capital accumulation or 'numeric capital' and possibly higher training costs, which places vocational graduates at the back of the queue. As Ding indicates in her empirical research on the labour market position of vocational and academic graduates, the comparative advantages of Chinese vocational college graduates are not apparent in their occupational domain and are easily surpassed by those of academic graduates (Ding, 2004).

While some studies (e.g. Brown and Souto-Otero, 2018) demonstrate a less important role played by educational credentials in determining employment outcomes, the findings of the current study indicate that the opposite is the case. In the Chinese labour market, there has been a significant increase in the number of jobs which require postsecondary credentials (Hu, 2013). Moreover, the starting salary and the likelihood of landing a job for academic graduates exceed the levels experienced by their vocational counterparts (Ding, 2004; Zhang, 2008). These conditions tend to compel young people to approach postsecondary learning with the clear aim of achieving the minimum level of qualification required for entry into skilled employment (Keep, 2005). Therefore, it could be considered a reasonable response to this trend that there is an increasing demand among students and their families to enter higher tier universities and to view vocational colleges as their last resort for obtaining this minimum level of qualification. These factors could also explain why some of the students had set their hearts on an arduous "upgrading scheme" in order to enrol in academic universities (see Section 6.6.2).

The findings in my study also demonstrate the deficiencies of human capital theory. Human capital theory is used to justify young people's strong commitment to human capital investment (Bai, 2006), as well as the government's mass expansion of the school system (Côté, 2014, p. 82). However, when envisioning their place in the labour market, these vocational youth failed to see their educational credentials as representing exchangeable skills that could be converted into profit (Chapter 6). As the findings indicate, almost a quarter of the Riverside student sample and 15% at Seaside did not believe they were well equipped with the necessary skills for the world of work (Section 6.4), while some also perceived the possible ceiling effect when entering the labour market (Section 6.2). Moreover, by overplaying the supply side of the economy (Green, 2013), human capital theory has promoted the excessive supply of graduates for the labour market. It increases competition for jobs and decreases wages in order to maximise profits by extracting high levels of surplus value from labour (Côté, 2014)

When investigating the Australian education system, Buchanan et al. found that the structural inequality and segregation of learning and employment outcomes were underpinned by core differences in access to vocational knowledge in vocational education versus higher education, and this inequality and segregation are reinforced by existing labour market structures (2009). Similar to the situation of the vocational students in this study, those disaffected with the academic curricula in Australia faced impoverished education

options with unclear pathways (2009). Therefore, a socially inclusive system should not only provide equal educational opportunities and validate both academic and work-based skills and knowledge, but also provide pathways for those who become initially or finally disaffected with academic streams (Avis, 2004). Buchanan et al. argue that clearly defined, self-directed and flexible pathways, supported by a unified qualifications framework, are of utmost importance (2009, p. 18).

8.4.2 Beyond the horizon

As indicated in Table 6.6, more than one in five of the respondents had no real ideas about their career plans. Others had very vague ideas and relatively short-term plans. The phenomenon of aimless job-searching and passive acceptance of whatever jobs become available was observed among the students in this study. It is necessary to analyse the reasons behind this phenomenon. For Hodkinson, young people's career decision-making and progression are enabled and constrained by their *horizons for action*, the arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p. 34). There are two parts to this. Horizons for action are influenced by a person's position in the employment 'field' (which refers to Bourdieu's concept of 'field') or 'opportunity structures', as Roberts argues (Roberts, 1968, 1975). Equally, they are also formed by the dispositions (termed the 'habitus' by Bourdieu) of the person him/herself and their subjective perceptions of what might be available and appropriate. The individual engages in pragmatically rational decision-making within the interaction of these two parts. This process has been theorised as *careership* (Hodkinson et al., 1996; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2008).

As mentioned above, the comparative advantages of vocational graduates were not apparent and these individuals could easily be replaced in the labour market (Ding, 2004). Their employment field was potentially restricted by them holding vocational degrees, as these credentials indicate decreased wages and a lower likelihood of employment. As for their subjective perceptions, the vocational students appeared less confident in their abilities to meet the requirements of high-skilled jobs, as they experienced a sense of inadequacy in skills preparation and job readiness. Even for jobs within their fields of study, some believed there would always 'be graduates who know more than I do…there won't be a great chance of getting hired for me'. As Yifan shared, professional jobs like translator 'are not for me' (Section 6.4). Having lower perceptions or ability-related 'beliefs' may have hindered them from forming proper career aspirations and pursuits (Bandura, 1997; Bandura et al., 2001).

High-skilled quality jobs, or a career progressing towards those jobs, remained outside of their horizons for action. Moreover, young people's attitude towards the role of family connections (*guanxi*) in their job hunting also influenced their subjective perceptions of what jobs might be available (Section 6.3.2). For example, for Gong, getting jobs in the public sector may require stronger *guanxi*, while for Guanglu, family connections were important because 'it is very hard to build up anything useful by yourself'. In Woronov's (2015) study of vocational students in China, she concludes that the *guanxi* economy was a primary reason for the problems they faced articulating their individual desires for the future. Far from becoming the 'active and enterprising subjects' that Hoffman (2010) describes, the students' understanding that family or personal connections could supplant qualifications, training, skills or interest as important factors in job seeking mitigated the ways in which the students were turned into 'choosing, desiring neoliberal subjects' (p.106).

Besides their lack of confidence in skills preparation, the vocational students also pointed out that a lack of role models and useful career information or resources negatively affected their forming of career goals. Individuals' 'aspirations window', through which they view the possibilities that exist within their social sphere, is usually based on the opportunities available in their community using their peers as a means of comparison (Gutman and Akerman, 2008). An 'aspirations window' may also be restricted if individuals do not understand how to achieve a particular goal (Gutman and Akerman, 2008). The students told me stories about their seniors who had been working as receptionists, purchasing assistants or call centre operators after completing college. These stories acted as evidence of the kinds of jobs and careers that would be considered 'valid or appropriate' for them to obtain in the future (Hodkinson et al., 1996). Therefore, the students may have had a hard time coming up with long-term plans for career progression as there were in fact no such plans in their horizons for action.

8.5 The stereotypes

Given the stereotyping of vocational education as a poor option compared to academic routes (Mok, 2001; Li, 2004; Yang, 2004; Zha, 2011; Liu and Wang, 2015), this study aims to find out how vocational education students see the stereotypes and how they perceive themselves in comparison to the academic students (Research Question 4). This section analyses vocational youth's perceptions of the stereotypes, as well as the prevalent societal sentiments and attitudes which make these stereotypes possible. It also contributes to answering Research Question 5: How does social theory help to explain the connection between the

economic/social structure and the experiences of young people? A Foucauldian perspective will be employed here to examine in detail the construction of 'self-governing neoliberal subjects' (Ball, 2013, p. 159). Coming from a Marxist theoretical tradition, Gramsci's concept of hegemonic power is also useful here to investigate how 'the consent of the governed' is managed and secured (Gramsci, 1971). Moreover, the ideas of the individualisation theorist Zygmunt Bauman will also contribute to the discussion (2001, 2007c). Relevant studies on streaming in schools, especially Stephen Ball's (1981) and David Hargreaves' (1967) work are also frequently referenced.

8.5.1 A pejorative label —stereotyping in college

As illustrated at the beginning of Chapter 7, the teaching staff I interviewed saw their students as 'bad seeds' with minimal motivation and diligence and with behaviours that were deviant from their expectations of normative students. It is helpful here to refer to some well-known research on streaming and banding in schools for the discussion in this section, for example, Stephen Ball's *Beachside Comprehensive* (1981) and David Hargreaves' *Social Relations in a Secondary School* (1967).

Ball investigated the effects of dividing students into groups by perceived ability level (1981). Similar to the teachers at Beachside, the teaching staff at Seaside also apply "labels", generated based on CEE exam results. The staff derived assumptions on the basis of those labels, rather than making their own evaluations of the relative abilities of individual students (Ball, 1981). According to Ball, stereotyping may be necessary for teachers to be able to order their expectations of and thus predict the actions of their students, especially in contexts where an individual interacts in various ways with 35 other individuals (1981, p. 37). Stereotyping by teachers may be considered an attempt to make sense of these interactions. Interpretations and references are thus generated from what teachers 'know' and from what they can see in front of them. Further information is sought to confirm and strengthen these stereotypes, and contradictory information tends to be overlooked (1981, p. 37). The teachers hold stereotypical images of the "vocational student identity", i.e. their 'bad seed' inferior status, based upon a selective perception or incorrect assessment of their students. According to two teachers in the study, Ning and Lianshuang, academic students were 'smart' and 'highly motivated', while vocational students were naturally 'slacking off' and less intelligent (Section 7.2). The teachers subscribed to a stereotypical discourse that simply assumes that any individual differences between students in terms of their ways of thinking or personal interests reflect the division between vocational and academic education.

The students' efforts or pursuits are only visible if they are academically related (i.e. working on upgrading exams, obtaining certificates). The students are led to believe that only academically related goals are worth pursuing or 'something they are supposed to do'. Therefore, these students appear to be 'aimless', 'unmotivated' and 'slack off' all the time. Viewed by the staff in terms of these singularly negative characteristics, "vocational student" becomes 'a pejorative label' imposed on them during their college years (Ball, 1981, p. 37). Their behaviour was interpreted in terms of the status they have been assigned and their merits would often be overlooked or misinterpreted (Cohen, 1972, p. 12).

As Hargreaves argues, teachers possess a set of values or expectations concerning the ways in which students *ought* to behave (1967, p. 104). Teachers have learned to expect certain kinds of behaviour from members of different streams. In this case, vocational students are "bad" students who deviate from the expectations. At Hargreaves' Lumley School, when dealing with 'low-stream students', the teachers tended to withdraw from their students' academic or disciplinary problems and ignore their existence (1967, p. 103). This phenomenon of teachers *withdrawing* was also observed by the students in my study. As Guanglu recounts in Section 5.4.2, his teachers 'indulge' the students too much, just let them be and 'do whatever they want'; at the same time, the teachers 'just carry on teaching like nothing happened'. Furthermore, the students were confronted with teachers who tended to hold negative perceptions of their intelligence and abilities— 'they [the teachers] do not expect much'. Talking about how the courses were assessed, Jiren said the teachers 'set the bar too low' and Xiaoxin said his teachers would 'turn a blind eye' during exams (see Section 5.4). Hargreaves found that as a result of the categorisation process, there were latent effects that were deleterious to the self-conception and development of the student (1967, p.105). Teachers' negative expectations reinforce students' negative behavioural tendencies, as well as their increasing awareness of their implied inferiority. Hargreaves terms this phenomenon 'a self-fulfilling prophecy' (1967, p. 106).

The stereotypes of the "vocational student identity" provide 'a framework within which the students must negotiate their social identity' (Ball, 1981, p. 38). Therefore, they represent an important constraint upon the range of possible social identities available to the students. Being an "intelligent", "dedicated" or "hard-working" student are identities that are not available to the vocational student because of the notions that accompany their pejorative labelling. Thus, the students perceived themselves as those who 'probably played around too much or drifted through', 'never get anything done', or 'have never been smart' (Section 7.4). Students like Xiaoxin even saw themselves as 'a slow, no school brain kind of student'

(Section 7.4.3). Many of them openly admitted that they had entered vocational colleges because they were not as "smart", "hard-working", or "motivated" as academic students. Within this sub-world the students have been allocated, they tend to identify themselves and are identified by others as non-academic types (Maddock, 1977, p. 575), or inferior types, in this case. They feel inadequate and ashamed for being at a vocational college. Just as the pupils in the low streams of Hargreaves' study (1967), Chinese vocational students are *double failures* due to both their poor CEE scores and their inability to gain entry to higher-tier universities. The vocational colleges, as we have seen, accentuated this state of failure and deprivation. Thus, the students were subjected to 'status frustration' (Hargreaves, 1967, p. 169), for not only were they unable to gain any sense of equality of worth in the eyes of their teachers or the public at large, but, as discussed in an earlier section, their occupational aspirations for their future lives in society were reduced in scope.

The evidence presented in this study also demonstrates that almost every aspect of a student is defined by their test scores. Test scores are more than just a quantitative expression of educational achievement; they condense and represent social value. In other words, young people increasingly *are* their grades (Woronov, 2015). The primary activity of young people in China today—their only approved activity—is studying, i.e. their labour in their academic school work (Qvortrup, 1994; Woronov, 2015). The product of this labour is their grades. However, the vocational students fail to be productive labourers. Therefore, they are perceived only and always as failed labourers. As failed labourers, they can only and ever be stupid, lazy, aimless, and unmotivated. Even their positive attributes (i.e. better social skills or flexibility) are considered reflections of the 'wrong investment' of their time. Their futures have already been limited by their vocational degree, a major indicator of their failed labourer status. The findings also support Yang's (2004) argument that the hierarchical selection system of higher education in China never works for vocational students as it only adopts academic standards. The performances of vocational colleges and their students are completely aligned with the academic route of higher education. This is the most evident sign of the failure of Chinese vocational education (Luo, 2013). This sense of there being a "gap" and the sense of inferiority leave vocational students with a great amount of self-doubt and a sense of low self-efficacy. The fact that exam performance was used as a mechanism of measurement and comparison will be further discussed in Section 8.6 of this chapter.

8.5.2 Disciplinary power—moving towards the optimum

In this study's investigation of the reasons behind these stereotypes, the powerful academically focused, exam-oriented societal sentiments and attitudes have been presented via student vignettes (see Section 7.5). As observed from the vignettes, these societal sentiments and attitudes formed a power which compelled the students to pursue higher levels of academic outcome, to desire ever-increasing accumulation of numeric capital (in the form of better scores), and, at the same time, generated the fear and guilt of being academically inadequate. This power was expressed and exercised through various aspects of the young people's lives—family expectations, secondary and current learning experiences, as well as the perceived ceiling effect in the job market. This power was so strong that it rendered the students repressed and exploited subjects which still conformed to, complied with and finally legitimised this power. In this section, these societal sentiments and attitudes will be discussed using the Foucauldian concept of disciplinary power.

Disciplinary power, 'a means of correct training' (Foucault, 1977, p.170), is focused on the individual body and the 'disciplinary technology of individual dressage' (Stoler, 1995, p. 82). As Foucault wrote, 'discipline "makes" individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise' (Foucault, 1977, p. 170). As can been seen from Vignette 1 in Section 7.5.1, Qiang's less-than-desirable grades caused a great deal of tension between Qiang and his mother, and his performance was always compared to his academically inclined cousin throughout his whole educational experience. Qiang's actions occurred within 'a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of a rule to be followed' (Foucault, 1977, p. 183). Similar to the expectations of the teaching staff in the college, the majority of parents also regarded achieving better academic outcomes as 'an optimum towards which one must move', which 'hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the "nature" of individual' and 'introduces, through this "value-giving" measure, the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved' (1977, p. 183). As Vignette 2 (see Section 7.5.1) indicates, Yuehan was also compelled to pursue academic excellence as a response to her father's displays of disappointment with her academic performance, even though she had little interest in doing so. The disciplinary power enacted by teachers and parents 'compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes' and '*normalizes*' young people (Foucault, 1977, p. 183). In his work *Governing Educational Desire*, Kipnis (2011) suggests some of the reasons that Chinese parents have high expectations for their children. According to Kipnis, the historical intersection of economic expansion and rapid urbanisation with the nationwide expansion of university places has allowed the majority of parents to dream of having a child

attend college, a dream that may not have been possible at another historical moment (2011, p. 54). Rapid development has left undereducated parents like Qiang's with the feeling that times are changing and that their own lack of experience in higher education is irrelevant to the possibilities for their children (Kipnis, 2011, p. 55). Moreover, the experience, under the birth control policy, of having fewer children has also heightened parental ambition for those children they do have, in rural and urban household alike (Kipnis, 2011, p. 61).

Under immense parental pressure to 'move towards the optimum', these young people lived within a frame of constant comparison and self-comparison. Their thoughts or actions were made meaningful and of value to the extent that their outcomes were up to certain academic standards. They were constantly being compared with academic students, both by others and by themselves. Through this constant comparison, they turn 'the gaze' upon themselves to see if they 'add up'; they learn to audit themselves, strive to live up to 'perfection codes', and self-confess through the academically focused discourse (Rose, 1996). The exam system made 'possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterization of collective facts, the calculation of gaps between individuals, their distribution in a given population' (Foucault, 1977, p.190). As a result of their 'self-auditing', the young people felt inadequate and inferior as they deviated from the 'optimum of action'(Foucault, 1977).

Furthermore, those who failed to move towards the 'optimum of action' (1977) were treated as outsiders in their high schools. As depicted in Vignette 3 in Section 7.5.2, Xiaoxin was advised to go home after being admitted to vocational college and was constantly reminded by his teacher of the inferiority of this "choice". Xiaoxin was what Foucault called a 'leper' in his high school. A leper's behaviour may be seen as 'detrimental to learning' or a threat 'to performance and the raising of standards' (Ball, 2013, p. 133). His teachers always "encouraged" him by threatening that *even* vocational college would not take someone like him if he got bad grades. Xiaoxin had lived in constant fear, worrying that he may end up having no college to go to. Those like Xiaoxin who 'under-performed were always subjected to the tyranny of little fears', while the systems designed to 'support or encourage those who are unable to keep up' (Rose, 1996, p. 54).

8.5.3 Giving consent

Individual students were not only the objects of disciplinary power but increasingly became the instruments of exercising this power as well. Their exercising the disciplinary power

could be seen as a way of actively giving consent to the current exam system. Many students featured in this research came to believe in, and then defend, the logic of meritocracy (see Section 7.4 and Section 7.6). As was repeatedly stated by these youngsters in the study, 'it [the system] is pretty fair'. They believed 'there is no better way than exams to judge who is better than whom' and they deserved their limited career options because they 'did not work hard enough in the past'. They regarded the level of one's education degree a decisive benchmark of one's competence and value. They could only come to accept their unsatisfactory outcomes if they could be made to believe (even falsely) that the system used to determine them was fair and legitimate (Jost, 1995). In Gramsci's notion of hegemony, he implies that consent in a hegemonic situation takes the form of active commitment, based on a deeply held belief in the legitimacy of the ruling system (Femia, 1975). This is the 'spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group' (Gramsci, 1971). Those who consent must somehow be truly convinced that 'account be taken of the interest of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised' and they 'feel permanently tied to the ideology and the leadership of the State as the expression of their beliefs and aspiration' (Tamburrano, cited in Femia, 1975). For these young people, the "meritocratic" exam system is designed for them to achieve possible social mobility by investing in individual "merits"—diligence, intelligence or capability. For the young people, it is an expression that their own interests are justly looked after. Thus, by actively giving consent, they were creating their own false consciousness, a false belief that their interests were protected and in line with the ideological leadership of the State.

The meritocratic exam system and the negative stereotyping of vocational students that it generates seemed to automatically explain any differences in individual outcome and mask fundamental issues in the educational system. The young people seemed to view the poor structuring of the vertically differentiated educational system and human resource management system as irrelevant to their problems. The false belief in the logic of meritocracy and the legitimacy of their stereotyping could be seen in terms of what Gramsci calls 'stratified deposits' (Gramsci, 1971), as it was slowly settled or sedimented into 'popular philosophy', 'without leaving an inventory' to trace its sources. Gramsci argues that people seldom know or ask the reason behind the apparently obvious taken-for-granted understandings (Hall and O'Shea, 2013). It becomes part of what Gramsci calls 'common sense', which is the uncritical perceiving and understanding of the world that has become 'common' in any given epoch (Gramsci, 1971, p. 322). Therefore, as Yuwei stated in the

focus group, 'it is very normal' for academic students to have better chances, and they need to 'pay for' their failures. Similarly, Hai thought '*of course* it [the system] is fair' (Section 7.6). In this way, they were made to accept their unfavourable place 'in the competition for a livelihood' in a commonsensical manner (Brown, 2003, p. 142).

Their "common sense" led them to falsely believe in the legitimacy of the system and take their disadvantaged position for granted. Stereotyping appears to serve a function of justifying the prevailing system of social arrangements (Jost and Banaji, 1994). These young people subscribed to stereotypic beliefs about themselves in such a way that their status seemed justifiable and appropriate. They formed the false consciousness that they *were* indeed the kinds of students who 'played around too much or drifted through', 'did not work hard enough' or were naturally 'slow' with 'no school brain'. Individual accountability and achievement are values which are constantly reinforced by the school and the media (Furlong and Cartmel, 1998). Hence, young people only have themselves to blame when the 'the blow of fate' strikes them (Bauman, 2007c).

8.5.4 'The salt of personal guilt'

The young people in this study felt inadequate and inferior, as they directed the blame onto themselves. They thought they had 'nothing to be confident about' and were embarrassed by their "vocational college status" (Section 7.4.5). As Bauman explains, this feeling of one's impotence and the inability to be adequate to the tasks of life has become 'the emblematic malaise of our late modern or postmodern times' (Bauman, 2001). In this way, 'the salt of personal guilt has been rubbed into the wound left by socially produced impotence' (Bauman, 2007c, p.111). The fear of inadequacy is generated from the resulting affliction. The vocational students saw their inadequacy as a 'stark reality', not as 'a sombre premonition' (Bauman, 2007c, p.111). When they failed to achieve those "better credentials", they needed to 'pay the price' (Bauman, 2007c, p. 13) for their own acts, or failure to act, as individuals.

8.6 Exam culture, agency and neoliberalism

Previous sections have discussed the stereotypes that vocational youth perceived as well as the academically focused, exam-oriented societal sentiments and attitudes. This section takes the discussion further by illustrating how the exam culture constructs the 'docile and capable' bodies for neoliberal society (Foucault, 1977, p. 294). The discussion here is informed by Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, particularly its relation to

examination (Foucault, 1977), Stephen Ball's idea of performativity (Ball, 2000, 2003, 2012), and its contribution to neoliberalism (Ball, 2012, 2013). In the last part of this section (8.6.3), I will employ three different theoretical perspectives within the framework (Figure 2.1) to focus on the agency of vocational youth and how it was manufactured and exploited in the neoliberal society (the primary research question).

8.6.1 Defining the individual

As the findings demonstrate, the students in this study had been under a tremendous amount of pressure to perform well in the College Entrance Exam (CEE). They had to compete fiercely with other secondary school pupils in order to beat the "cut-off lines" (see Section 4.2). A student's performance in the CEE was seen as a crucial indicator of one's merit, potential and value by parents, teachers, and the society at large. These young people were told to believe that the exam was the most meritocratic way of evaluating a student (see Section 7.4). Finding oneself at vocational college was a result of their failing the most important exam of their lives. The exam establishes over individuals 'a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them' (Foucault, 1977, p. 184). For Foucault, the examination is 'a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish', thus combining all the techniques of disciplinary power (1977, p. 184). The exam-focused educational structure maintained an individual young person as 'describable, analyzable object' in 'his individual features, in his particular evolution, in his own aptitudes or abilities, under the gaze of a permanent corpus of knowledge' (Foucault, 1977, p. 190). The structure also introduced 'a comparative system that made possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterization of collective facts, the calculation of the gaps between individuals' (Foucault, 1977, p. 190). Therefore, the students were individualised, qualified and classified by their exam results. Their individual performances, aptitudes and abilities were demonstrated by the numbers on the mark sheets. The examination, as 'the pinning down of each individual in his own particularity', indicates 'the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality, and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the "marks" that characterize him and make him a "case"' (1977, p. 191). The vocational youth are linked by their "vocational student" status that indicates their position at the bottom of their group and the "gap" between them and other pupils in terms of exam performance. It is each student's very individuality that was measured, judged, compared and classified, and it is also the individual who had to be responsible for his or her own exam performance, which then defined his or her status. In

Foucault's opinion, by turning real lives into calculable descriptions, examination has made the definition of individuality a means of control and a method of domination, which functions as a process of objectification and subjection (1977).

8.6.2 'Adding value' to yourself

The students were 'described' and 'individualised' by their test scores (Foucault, 1977). Their values were condensed and represented by this quantitative description of educational performance (Woronov, 2015). Stephen Ball's concept of performativity is particularly useful here in terms of analysing the technology of examination. Based on the ideas of Foucault and Lyotard, Stephen Ball developed his concept of performativity, which has been used in discussing the changes faced by teachers and academics in neoliberal contexts (Ball, 2003, 2012). Performativity is a technology that 'links effort, values, purposes and self-understanding to measures and comparisons of output' (2012). As the findings in this study indicate, the students' performance in exams serve as 'measures of productivity', or 'displays of "quality"', which stand for or encapsulate 'the worth, quality or value' of an individual student (Ball, 2000). The students are valued solely by their 'productivity', i.e. their test scores. Therefore, they are no longer encouraged to focus on acquiring knowledge or skills for their own sake but are required instead to produce better test scores and improve their outputs and exam performance. As Jia commented in Section 7.7, 'all that hard work and time invested in the past was all for a piece of paper at the CEE exam', and 'the whole point of studying was just to take the exam on that day'. By only focusing on the measurable "output", the students failed to see the connection between what they learned and their career development. Many students confessed to me that for them, learning in high school was nothing but a process of preparing for exams.

For Ball, 'there is a real possibility that authentic social relations are replaced by judgmental relations wherein persons are valued for their productivity alone' (2000). In this study, the young people's value as persons was eradicated and they 'increasingly *are* their test scores' (Woronov, 2015). Therefore, the vocational students' relations with their teachers, parents and other social actors became 'judgmental relations' (Ball, 2000) and they were judged, classified and stereotyped by their low productivity, or, to use Woronov's term, by their 'numeric capital' (2015). There was a proliferation of calculations and visibilities within which the students related to one another and sought their places, their worth and their needs (Ball, 2012). These young people were expected to 'care' about their exam performance and 'to be passionate about excellence' with 'an eye to the competition' (Ball, 2003). They

learned that they need to be better than others and to perform above the "cut-off lines". They were encouraged to think about themselves as individuals who calculate about themselves, 'add value' to themselves, improve their productivity, and strive for excellence (Ball, 2003). They were 'enterprising subjects', who live their lives as 'an enterprise of the self' (Rose, 1992). Through the 'intensive work on the self' (Dean, 1995, p. 581), these youngsters recognised and took responsibility for the relationship between their own exam performance and its consequences.

In his work, Ball illustrates how performativity has functioned as 'a key mechanism of neoliberal government' (Ball, 2012, 2013, p. 163). Neoliberalism can be seen as the politics of 'not governing too much' (Foucault, 2010, p. 248), but, at the same time, it has been able to extend the economic form of the market 'to the entire social body and to generalise it inside the whole social system that, normally, does not pass through or is not authorised by the market' (Foucault, 2010, p. 248). The move from the welfare state to the neoliberal state (see Sections 1.5 and 2.2.3) involves 'a redistribution of responsibilities and the emergence of new forms of government—self-government' (Ball, 2013, p. 156). Ball argues that 'neo-liberalism is made possible by a "new type of individual", an individual formed within the logic of competition—a calculating, solipsistic, instrumentally driven "enterprise man"' (2013, p. 158). The discourse of agility is firmly rooted in neoliberal ideology and is recognisable as a form of governance, a contemporary governmentality which promises to 'shape the conduct of diverse actors without shattering their formally autonomous character' (Miller and Rose, 2008, p. 39). Individuals are engaged in a form of insidious 'disciplined self-management' (Ozga, 2009, p. 152). They are required to be calculative, competitive, and agentic. They take responsibility for working harder, faster and better as part of their developing a sense of personal worth and their estimation of the worth of others, which makes an individual into an enterprise and a 'self-maximizing productive unit' operating in a market of performances (Ball, 2013, p. 167).

In this study, through the technique of performativity, the vocational students turned 'the gaze' upon themselves to see if they 'added up'; they constantly audited themselves, and made themselves feel guilty and inadequate when they thought they had failed (Rose, 1996). Performativity gave the individual students their 'calculabilities' (Ball, 2013, p. 167). This generates their market value, enables the state to 'pick off' poor performers, and makes it possible to 'translate educational work into contracts articulated as forms of performance delivery' (Ball, 2013, p. 167). That these youngsters were considered poor performers by

the state indicates their low market value and poor performance delivery for potential employers when trying to 'contract out' their labour (Ball, 2013). The young people were unable to act 'towards the optimum' and failed to fulfil their responsibilities as neoliberal individuals (Foucault, 1977).

8.6.3 Agency and neoliberalism

In Karen Evans's work, agency is brought in as a concept which explains agentic behaviours as well as a subjective feeling or belief that young people possess (2002, p. 260). Agentic behaviours were identified when some young people in her study would go against current social patterns, such as leaving home or finding work at different times from the rest of the sample (2002, pp. 257-258). When looking at the stories of the vocational youth in this study, this "agentic behaviour" or "feeling" does not seem to appear. The vocational students could not act against the current economic/social structure, and few even questioned the structure. Thus, the conceptualisation of agency in this 'middle ground' position (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014, p. 464) seems to be less helpful to explain the situation of the young people in my study.

Rather than having an "agentic" feeling, the vocational students felt fatalistic or powerless when they were "dropped down" and had to "choose" a vocational college or programme. In contrast with Evans's findings in her research (Rudd and Evans, 1998; Evans, 2002), when talking about their futures, the young people in my study *did not* appear to 'typically be optimistic' (Rudd and Evans, 1998; Evans, 2002). Almost one in five students at each of the colleges was pessimistic about their future because they were perfectly aware that their career chances were greatly constrained by their "vocational student status" (Section 6.2). Therefore, in this research, the young people were not totally silent on the role of structure and certainly *not* 'blind to the existence of powerful chains of interdependency' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, p. 114). Brannen and Nilsen suggest that the narratives young people tell about their lives will be dominated by agency, which reflects a difficulty in comprehending the contextual forces that shape their lives (2005, p. 423). For the young people in my study, however, rather than being dominated by agency, their stories were filled with a perceived sense of agency when justifying the legitimacy of the exam system and assigning blame to themselves, even though they were the victims of this particular system (Ling, 2015; Woronov, 2015).

In opposition to Furlong and Cartmel's opinion that 'young people may not be as aware of the existence of constraints as they are of their attempts at personal intervention' (1997, p. 7) and Evans' idea of 'bounded agency' (Evans, 2002, 2007), for those in this study, a mixture of a narrative of perceived agency and an acknowledgement of structure seems to exist. These findings may differ from previous analyses for the reason that the young people involved in this study were vocational students in a country that only values academic learning; they may have experienced more constraints to their agency than other research subjects. On the other hand, it may be that data gathered by researchers in other countries was interpreted as indicating more "agency" than similar data collected in this study would allow.

The findings in this study provide a complicated and nuanced understanding of the roles of structure and agency in young people's subjectivity. Structural forces, especially those of educational systems, were not assumed to be the contexts in which they operated or something they took for granted. Their biographies are written in a language of a false perception of choice and punctuated by institutional ambivalence. Instead of further investigating or questioning the conceptualisation of agency in the "traditional" way (mentioned in Section 1.3, e.g. Thomson et al., 2004, Brannen & Nilsen, 2005) or contributing to the discussion of 'unproductive dichotomies between "agency" and "structure"', as Coffey and Farrugia (2014) posit, this study, using three different theoretical strains, argues that agency was manufactured through false consciousness, 'disciplined self-management', or the process of individualisation. In this study, it has been observed that agency in fact is a perceived control or choice and sense of responsibility among young people under a neoliberal influence. Agency appears when young people falsely believed they had control over their test scores and could 'choose to study hard' and realise their goals; it also appears when they failed to achieve the desired outcome and took responsibility for the consequences of that "choice". The exam system assigns Chinese vocational youth to a workforce required by the export-oriented economy (Koo, 2016). The future young labour force is managed through a perceived meritocratic system that minimises their class consciousness, as their "bad choice" is a matter of individual responsibility, rather a result of the acts of dispossession. The perceptions that they possessed agency, a capacity to make choices and take responsibility were constructed to feed the needs of the neoliberal impact.

As Dean argues, there are two intertwined technologies turning us into governable subjects (Dean, 1999):

technologies of agency, which seek to enhance and improve our capacities for participation, agreement and action; and technologies of performance, in which these capacities are made calculable and comparable so that they might be optimized. If the former allow the transmission of flows of information from the bottom, and the formation of more or less durable identities, agencies and will, the latter make possible the indirect regulation and surveillance of these entities. (Dean, 1999, p. 173)

Individuals are produced rather than oppressed, animated rather than constrained (Ball, 2012). The young people in this study were burdened with the responsibility to act, strive and perform; if they did not do so, they were in danger of being seen as irresponsible. Their output or performance delivery was made calculable and comparable in order to 'produce bodies that are docile and capable' (Foucault 1977, p. 294). In this study, we have seen the students worked really hard and responsibly for their CEE exams to beat the "cut-off lines", or as part of their "upgrading scheme" to shed themselves of their "vocational student status", or for the various certificates that they thought would help them to obtain employment. They also felt that they had only themselves to blame for being relegated to vocational college and the possibly bleak future this may confer upon them. If agency is conceived as young people's individual capacities to act, strive and perform, and their responsibilisation, then this study has demonstrated that the perception of agency among young people has been manufactured and used as one of the technologies of neoliberal governance.

8.7 Summary

With the aim of addressing my research questions, this chapter has discussed the research findings in the context of the relevant research and theoretical perspectives. It has also attempted to contribute to the debate on the role and extent of youth agency, skills formation in vocational colleges, the stereotypes with which these young people have been burdened, and an exam culture that constructs individuals under neoliberal influence.

The "choice" of enrolling in vocational programmes upon leaving secondary education could be seen as a passive response to the increasing demand for educational credentials. When making their "choices", calculation and flexibility were required from the young people in order to negotiate within their 'risk biographies' (Beck, 1992). As for their experiences in vocational college, the less-than-satisfactory training quality and the inadequate support made learning in class meaningless for the students; these factors might indicate that their inattentive attitudes were a result of their non-productive learning

experiences. The discoordination and fragmentation between skill development and deployment, work and education rendered the vocational students helpless when developing their vocational aspirations. They received signals from the labour market that their vocational degrees were likely to leave them last to be "picked" by potential employers. The students lacked confidence in their skills preparation and readiness to such an extent that long-term plans and career progression were never within their 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Furthermore, these young people were burdened with the pejorative "vocational students" label and unable to gain any sense of worth in the eyes of their teachers or the public at large. They were required to perform 'towards the optimum' (Foucault, 1977) under the exam-focused societal sentiments and disciplinary power. They falsely perceived the current system as being fair and just; hence, they gave their consent to it and felt that it was they who had failed.

By analysing the individualisation process of the young people in the study, this chapter has also demonstrated how the effects of structural forces or systemic errors on young people's biographies became obscured and, at the same time, how individual agency was manufactured and governed with the aid of the mechanisms of exam and performativity, as the technologies of neoliberalism.

The following chapter will review the main findings of this study and outline their implications, as well as the study's limitations and the need for further research.

Chapter 9 CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined young people's experiences in two Chinese vocational colleges. It investigates how young people navigate their pathways to post-secondary education and work in China's Reform Era.

The main focus of the thesis is an exploration of the primary research question: How are young people in China exercising "personal agency" in their educational and career choices within the existing social and educational structure?

The Supplementary Research Questions are:

1. What are the students' experiences of choosing a vocational college and programme?

2. How do young people experience attending vocational college and what are their perspectives on the vocational programmes as preparation for the world of work?

3. What are vocational students' perspectives of their future career possibilities?

4. How do vocational students compare themselves with those following academic routes?

5. In what ways does social theory help us explain the impact of the economic/social structure on the experiences of young people in vocational colleges?

These questions were designed to expand the scope of knowledge and challenge the existing literature by investigating the experiences of young people in a society that has undergone sweeping economic and social reform (Harvey, 2005). This chapter reflects on these research questions, summarises the major findings, and outlines possible implications for policy and practice. The limitations of the thesis and recommendations for further study are also discussed.

9.1 Reflecting on the research questions and the major findings

When investigating these young people's post-secondary choice-making process (Research Question 1), the present study firstly revealed the stress the vocational students had been facing when preparing for the College Entrance Exam (CEE), and the guilt and frustration they experienced when they were "dropped down" to vocational colleges. In this unpredictable academic gamble, they were required to be strategic and place their "bets" wisely on the best college and programme, as far as they could best judge, in order to maximum their chances of accessing post-secondary education, even if it meant accepting the programmes in which they were less interested (see Chapter 4).

The findings also provide evidence of various issues with the vocational programmes reported by the students (Research Question 2), such as the academicised curriculum with weak links to the workplace, the didactic and disengaging pedagogies, and the lack of a well-structured assessment system in the colleges. These problems seem to have contributed to the students appearing to be 'passing time' or 'getting by' in their classes. Students at the privately funded college reported receiving a higher level of support from the staff during their courses than those in the state-funded one. However, students from both colleges expressed feelings of being unsupported in terms of careers advice and guidance (see Chapter 5). As for the programmes' relevance to the world of work (Research Question 2), the students found it difficult to see their courses as "vocational" due to the fact that the colleges sometimes failed to effectively provide a vocational training component; the need for such a vocational component was particularly acute given that the students' academically focused and exam-driven schooling history had not helped them form a basic understanding of the world of work. However, the private college did in fact provide IT and writing skills courses, which the students found very useful and relevant to work.

The students' perceptions of the job market and their career plans were also investigated (Research Question 3). Some students perceived a ceiling effect, whereby their career options were constrained by their vocational degrees, which they expected to be regarded as inferior compared to academic degrees. However, others believed that finding a suitable job was down to individual capabilities and personal achievement, rather than to factors such as the public's perception of their degrees, which they saw as external to them. The findings also show the young people's lack of confidence in the skills preparation and job readiness provided by the vocational colleges. There was a disturbingly large proportion of the students (25% at Riverside; 18% at Seaside) with problems forming career plans. Some students tended to passively accept whatever was on offer job- and career-wise, rather than consciously make a choice (see Chapter 6).

It became clear that the vocational students' feelings of inadequacy were compounded by their experiences of stereotyping, both within their colleges and from the public at large (Research Question 4). They experienced being treated as 'bad seeds' by their teachers and considered naturally 'lazy' and 'low quality' youth by the public. Internalising these stereotypes, the vocational youth also saw themselves as less diligent, intelligent, and motivated compared to the academic students. Some even felt inadequate and ashamed of their "vocational student status". The stereotypes were constructed by powerful

academically focused societal sentiments and attitudes captured via several vignettes of the students' life stories, which record their interactions with parents and teachers in secondary schools. Most of the vocational students attributed the blame for their misfortune (being relegated to vocational college and stereotyped by the society) to themselves, as they believed the system was meritocratic. They were actively taking responsibility for their failures or "bad choices". Few students retargeted the blame or even questioned the academically focused hierarchical education system.

Utilising a framework consisting of three theoretical perspectives, this project also provided empirical evidence to demonstrate how social theory can help us explain the connection between the economic/social structure and the experiences of young people in vocational colleges (Research Question 5). The unique power of each of these theories contributed to understanding the lives of the young people in the Chinese Reform Era. The project empirically verified the individualisation thesis and illuminated the ways in which the thesis could explain the individual choice-making within the 'institutionally structured risk environment' (Giddens, 1991) (see Sections 8.2.1 and 8.5.4). The Foucauldian perspective provided the descriptive power to illustrate how individual behaviours were governed by a series of technologies, especially examination (see Sections 8.5.2, 8.6.1, and 8.6.2). Moreover, the Marxian perspective targeted the root causes and consequences of the ways that the individual young people behaved (Côté, 2014a), demonstrating how and why they harboured false consciousness and gave consent to the hegemonic power (see Section 8.2.2 and Section 8.5.3).

For the vocational youth, it is apparent that individual agency was manufactured and governed with the aid of the mechanisms of exam and performativity to produce neoliberal subjects (primary research question). Choosing a vocational college upon leaving secondary education could be seen as a passive response to the increasing demand for educational credentials in China's post-Reform Era. Having been streamed to vocational colleges, these youngsters received only fragmented skills training and lacked the confidence and skills readiness to envisage long-term career progression. They were further burdened with the label that is of itself pejorative: "vocational students". They were reminded that it was their own failure that rendered them unable to gain any sense of worth. The young people in this study were expected to take responsibility for working hard for the competitive College Entrance Exam (CEE), for their "upgrading schemes", and to obtain the various certificates that they believed would help them to obtain employment. The dominant narrative was that

they had only themselves to blame for finding themselves in a disadvantaged place. Their experience demonstrates the political and economic culture of neoliberalism, with its stress on individualism and competition. The perceived individual capacity to make choices and the 'responsibilisation' of the self (Rose, 1992), are sedimented in the Chinese social consciousness. As Ren mentioned in the focus group, 'it is the rule of the society'. This group of young people, managed by a system they perceived as being meritocratic, form the future young labour force. Their agency—the perceived capacity to make choices and take responsibility—was constructed and managed to feed the needs of the neoliberal market and China's export-oriented economy.

9.2 Contributions and implications

By investigating the lives of vocational students, the present study makes important contributions in both a theoretical and practical sense.

In terms of its theoretical contributions, the study further problematises and critiques the roles that the concepts of agency and structure play in youth studies. The study goes beyond the usual approach of explaining social life solely in terms of either structure or agency (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014) to challenge the meaning of both of these terms and the way in which their relationship is conceived. By challenging some of the fundamental assumptions underpinning contemporary youth research (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Rudd and Evans, 1998; Evans, 2002), the study hopes to arrive at more complicated and powerful analyses of the ways in which young people's biographies and decisions are shaped by their social environment. Analysing the actualities of young people under conditions of state-sponsored social changes and risks (Yan, 2010), the research also constitutes an attempt to construct a theoretical framework which consists of three different theoretical traditions. This study attempts to verify and critique the existence of individualisation processes and to investigate the construction of neoliberal subjects within the context of the redistribution of wealth in the Chinese Reform Era.

As for the practical contributions of this study, it explores young people's feelings and perspectives about their programmes and colleges to produce viewpoints on the supplying of skills by Chinese vocational colleges, as well as on the position of the vocational education sector within the educational system. The study reveals the problems in terms of skills training in vocational colleges, especially its discoordination and fragmentation from the world of work, which, to some extent, contributes to the students' difficulties in forming

their career plans. The research also demonstrates the awkward position in which the vocational colleges find themselves, being aligned with academic colleges within the higher education system.

This study's findings indicate that the skills development of young people in vocational college needs to be considered and coordinated with various actors, such as employers, industry experts, educators, and policy advisors. Different groups of actors must be motivated by mutually reinforcing advantages in order to link educational and occupational progression and provide high-quality vocational pathways for young people. Rather than strictly focusing on academic learning and exam results, the students need to be provided with work-related learning and vocational skills development from their early years onwards. Adequate and useful careers guidance should be made available for the students in secondary schools and vocational colleges. Rather than being positioned at the bottom of the higher education hierarchy, the vocational education sector should be developed independently in parallel with higher education. It should be entitled to its own access, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

The study also provides a valuable source of data for investigating the stereotyping of vocational students in Chinese society. It was found that the vocational college students were burdened with pejorative stereotyping by their teachers as well as by the public at large. The academically driven, exam-focused societal sentiments and attitudes made the young people internalise these stereotypes and perceive themselves as less diligent, less motivated and less intelligent youth, who deserved to be in their disadvantaged positions. The study demonstrates that there is a need to promote vocational education as a respected career option and a valuable alternative to academic learning. A campaign to promote vocational pathways among young people, parents and their community should be developed to present the potential benefits of vocational learning.

As for the demand side of skills, industry leaders, major employers, and trade bodies should be key partners with vocational colleges to make a direct contribution to the development of high-quality vocational pathways. Rather than focusing on labelling graduates (e.g. with qualifications), employers need to adopt capability-based job requirements. A clear, up-to-date and industry-driven set of occupational standards and qualification framework are needed to establish the connection between skill development at college and skill

performance in the workplace. Vocational students should be given access to more internship positions that provide relevant hands-on experience and educational value.

9.3 The new vocational education policies in China

As discussed in Section 2.2.3, I do not argue that China has fully embraced the neoliberal path as key areas of the Chinese economy have always remained collectivised and under state control (Ong and Zhang, 2008; Weber, 2018). I argue instead that the experiences of the vocational youth in this study are a by-product of the neoliberal turn the Chinese Government took in the Reform Era. In order to address this by-product, the Chinese Government has been strengthening the focus on vocational education for the past few years, most noticeably with the new policies and expenditure plans presented at the 2017 Communist Party Congress (2017). The urgent need to ensure that vocational education is aligned with the needs of industry has been acknowledged by the Government. Its intention is to establish an advanced, employer-driven vocational education system, as demonstrated by the recent *Guidelines* (discussed in Section 2.2.1) (State Council, 2018). In 2019, the Chinese State Council published the *Implementation Plan on National Vocational Education Reform*, which intends to build stronger vocational pathways from school to work (State Council, 2019b). The *Implementation Plan* has been further reinforced by Premier Li's Government Work Report, which announced that 100 billion RMB will be invested in vocational education for 15 million people to upgrade their skills (State Council, 2019a). The purpose of the *Implementation Plan* is to raise the status of vocational education by reforming the entire vocational education framework, including occupational standards, assessment and evaluation mechanisms, teacher training and recruitment, and industry engagement. A National Vocational Education Steering Committee will be established to oversee the reform (State Council, 2019b). The *Implementation Plan* places greater importance on the quality of teaching and training in vocational education. It seeks to increase the proportion of teachers who have at least three years' work experience in industry and a vocational degree. Moreover, a piloting of the '1+X' model will be held from March 2019. This model allows vocational institutions and universities to offer a qualification plus a number of skills certificates (State Council, 2019b). The State Council has also explored a new admission model for vocational colleges, providing diversified channels of admission other than by taking the CEE (Ministry of Education, 2018). The above-mentioned guidelines and plans demonstrate, at a policy level, China's commitment to reform the current vocational education system.

9.4 Limitations and the need for further research

The present study explores the choice-making process of young people in Chinese vocational colleges and seeks to make a contribution through a provisional exploration of such issues from the students' perspectives. It primarily focuses on students' experiences in vocational colleges. It lacks an investigation of these young people's labour market outcomes and their experiences in the workplace as a part of the young labour force, especially compared with the graduates of academic routes. Further empirical work could involve the investigation of these issues. It is also a small study involving 200 vocational students and a small sample of teachers. It is possible that the sample is not large enough to sufficiently examine the societal attitudes within the Chinese society. The perspectives of the employers, parents, academic students, policy makers, and more teachers could also be included.

This study examines young people's lived experiences within the social, economic and educational structures. However, the relationship between young people's socio-economic status and their access to vocational college is not explored. It is possible for further research to use a quantitative approach to explore this relationship and utilise the labour force survey to investigate the social mobility provided by the vocational route.

A theoretical framework has been constructed for this study by referring to three different theoretical perspectives—the individualisation thesis, a Foucauldian perspective, and the Marxist perspective. The aim of this study was not to produce a synthesis of these three theories or to achieve a theoretical coherence. It is recommended for future research to explore further the integration of these three theoretical perspectives. The concept of false consciousness could also be further developed. It would be interesting to explore how the Marxist perspective may provide possible solutions to the predicaments of young people.

Further research on the effect of the new reform (mentioned in the previous section) on the lives of vocational students is also needed. It would be particularly worthwhile to investigate how the new policies have been enacted and to evaluate to what extent they have strengthened the vocational pathways for young people in China, especially within the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and digitalisation. As the State Council has decided to explore a new admission model for vocational colleges, providing other channels of admission as an alternative to the College Entrance Exam (CEE), it would be useful to look into how this change could potentially impact young people's belief in the "logic of meritocracy".

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Appendix 1—Questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of a research study to understand better vocational students' educational history, their college experiences, and their future plans. The questionnaire may give you an opportunity to reflect on your own situation. In addition, your perspectives, which will be anonymized and confidential, will be very helpful for the college and the policymakers.

Thank you for your assistance.

PART I –YOUR BACKGROUND

1. Name:

2. Age:

3. Gender (Please tick):   Male   Female   Other

4. Province of origin:

5. Your college:

6. Your programme of study:

7. Year of study: 1st year
                    2nd year/3rd year
                    final year
                    others (please specify)

8. College Entrance Exam score:

9. What are the main occupations of your father:

	Father
a) industrial worker (plant/machine operators; assembly-line operators etc.)	
b) corporate manager or senior official	
c) agricultural or fishery worker	
d) professional (scientists; engineers; health/legal professionals; teachers etc.)	
e) clerk (office clerks; secretaries; typists etc.)	
f) service or sales worker (travel attendants; restaurant service worker; personal care workers; salespersons; street vendors etc.)	
g) government official	
h) private enterprises owner	
i)small business owner	
i)unemployed or semi-unemployed	
k) other, please specify:	

10. What are the main occupations of your mother:

	Mother
a) industrial worker (plant/machine operators; assembly-line operators etc.)	
b) corporate manager or senior official	
c) agricultural or fishery worker	
d) professional (scientists; engineers; health/legal professionals; teachers etc.)	
e) clerk (office clerks; secretaries; typists etc.)	
f) service or sales worker (travel attendants; restaurant service worker; personal care workers; salespersons; street vendors etc.)	
g) government official	
h) private enterprises owner	
i)small business owner	
i)unemployed or semi-unemployed	
k) other, please specify:	

11. Please explain briefly why you chose this college:

a) Locality
b) Suitable course/appropriate course content
c) College has a good reputation
d) Recommended by others
e) Test score
f) Other reason, please specify:

12. To what extent did you have interest in the programme you chose?

    a) Very interested in it
    b) Somewhat interested in it
    c) Neutral
    d) Not that interested in it
    e) Not at all interested in it

PART II –YOUR EXPERIENCE IN VOCATIONAL COLLEGE

13. How satisfied are you with your college experience, in terms of:

	Highly satisfied	Fairly Satisfied	unsure	Not very satisfied	Not at all satisfied
a) Physical surroundings, i.e. buildings, classrooms					
b) The standard of teaching/lecturing					
b) The amount of work set					
c) Course content					
d) Relevance of course to life after college					
e) Careers guidance					

14. Your favourite things about this college and programme so far:

15. Your least favourite things about this college and programme so far:

PART III –YOUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

16. Which of the following have you experienced at the college?

	YES (please briefly evaluate your experience)	NO
a) Detailed advice on post-college options		
b) Detailed careers advice sessions		
c) Individual careers interviews		
d) Hands-on Work experience		

17. To what extent do you have definite career plans?
    a) Have definite career plans
    b) Have a reasonable idea of what career to follow
    c) Have a vague idea of what career to follow
    d) Do not have any real idea

18. Since choosing this college and this programme, have you changed your aspirations about the job or profession you would like to take up?

    YES   NO   Don't know/not applicable

    If YES, then

    19. When I first started at the college, I wanted to study/become a:

    20. Now, I am going to be or plan to become a:

21. What qualifications/certificates have you obtained or planning to obtain?
 a) Professional qualifications in your field   please specify which one(s):
 b) English proficiency (College English Test 4)
 c) English proficiency (College English Test 6)
 d) English A level certificate
 e) IT certificates
 f) Mandarin proficiency test
 g) Other   please specify:

22. What practical programmes have you obtained or are planning to obtain?
 a) Internship programme in your field of study, please specify which one(s):
 b) Internship programme outside your field of study, please specify which one(s):
 c) Vocational Traineeship/apprenticeship, please specify which one(s):
 d) Volunteer programme, please specify which one(s):
 e) Other programme (please specify)
 f) Haven't done anything like that/no plan to do anything like that

23. How do you feel about your job prospects after finishing college?
 a) Very optimistic
 b) Somewhat optimistic
 c) Neutral
 d) Somewhat pessimistic
 e) Very pessimistic

24. How important, in your opinion, are the following factors when it comes to looking for a job?

	Very important	Quite Important	Neutral	Not particularly important	Not at all important
a) A person's family background					
b) A person's academic level					
c) A person's competence for the job (the ability to do a job properly)					
d) A person's education/qualification (i.e. Vocational/academic degree;					

bachelor/master degree)					
e) A person's social skills					

25. To which extent do you think success in finding a job depends upon the individual? (Please tick the most appropriate statement to represent your views)
 a) It is very much down to the individual.
 b) It depends on both the individual and other factors (such as family background, connections, gender, locality etc.)
 c) It mainly depends on other factors, (such as family background, connections, gender, locality etc.).

26. If b) or c) is selected, please select three factors you think are the most important affecting your success in finding a job:
   Family background
   Family and personal connections
   Gender
   Government policy
   Job opportunities in the region
   the cost of living in the region
   Employers' attitude to employing young people
   Other factors (Please specify)

27. In your opinion, is it more difficult or less difficult to find employment with a vocational-focused degree compared to students with academic degrees?
 a) More difficult
 b) About the same/average
 c) Less difficult
 d) Hard to say, please share your view:

28. How well equipped do you think this college will make you for the world of work in terms of following types of skills?

	Very well equipped	Reasonably well equipped	Neutral	Not very well equipped	Poorly equipped
a) Technical knowledge/skills in your field					
b) Basic writing and reading skills					
c) Social skills					
d) Practical knowledge/skills					

29. To your knowledge, which sector/industry is easiest for you to get a job?
   IT/communication industry
   Banking/finance
   Service industry
   Real estate/construction

Manufacturing

Education/training

Retailing

Entrepreneuring

Others, please specify:

I don't know

30. What is your plan after completing college?

a) Employment

b) Further vocational training (internship/Apprenticeship/traineeship)

c) Further academic study ("upgrading"/pursue oversea degrees)☐

d) Time off

e) Not so sure

f) Other, provide details:

31. In what ways have you looked for work? (Tick all those that apply)

    a) Visited job fairs

    b) Talking to teachers

    c) Looked through newspaper/website adverts

    d) Phoned or visited employers

    e) Asked family

    f) Asked friends

    g) Any other way? Please say what

    h) I haven't tried to look for work yet

32. Thank you for completing this questionnaire. If there is anything else you would like to tell the college or the policy makers, please write it in below. We shall be most interested to read what you have to say.

33. Would you like to be involved in group discussion activities for this research? (We will provide refreshments, gifts, and WeChat money)

Yes

No

Maybe

34. (If Yes and Maybe), Please provide your WeChat ID

35. Would you like to be involved in a private chatting for this research? (We will provide refreshments, gifts, and WeChat money)

Yes

No

Maybe

36. (If Yes and Maybe), Please provide your WeChat ID

Appendix 2—Interview/Focus Group guide

Interview/focus group guide for the students (approximately 1 hour):
A LIST OF POSSIBLE THEMES

The initial central topic
The stories of you making major educational choices/decisions in the past

Question phase
Opinions about the college and the programme
Opinions about being a student in the lower tiered college/what do you think of the prevalent attitudes?
Experience of degree of control/responsibility in the programme

Career aims/aspiration after finishing the programme
Likelihood of finding a suitable job (optimism/pessimism)
Has the programme help you prepare for work? How vocational-oriented do you think this programme is? How does the college provide careers advice?
To what extend is finding a job down to the individual effort? Or other factors (family background/status; locality etc.) are more important?
Opinions about the reception of lower tiered college qualification in society and labour market/how does it influence one's career prospect?

Small talk (off the record)

Interview guide for the teaching staff (approximately 1 hour):
A LIST OF POSSIBLE THEMES

Biographical information: gender; number of years working in the college; number of students currently teaching; the courses currently teaching

Question phase:
What do you think of your students in terms of their performance in class?
Opinions about students' decision-making/taking on responsibility
What do you think is the biggest problem your students facing in their college life?

What do you think of the college and the programmes in terms of their vocational emphasis? In what way do the programmes in college help students to be prepared for work?
Opinions about prevalent attitudes towards vocational students
What do you think the differences between lower tiered vocational college students and those in higher tiered academic universities, except their exam scores?

How did your previous students find jobs? (if applicable) What kind of job they had? (if applicable)
How did you help the students with their career plans before? (if applicable)
Opinions about the reception of lower tiered college qualification in society and labour market/how does it influence one's career prospect?

Appendix 3—Plain Language Statement (for the students)

The study title: Making choices? The Lives of Vocational college students in China.

The researcher detail: Geng Wang (2280163), School of Education, University of Glasgow.

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

The purpose of the study is to find out how vocational college students make educational and career choices in their lives. It is important because policy makers need to understand vocational students' experiences and opinions. Parents' and staff perspectives' will also be gathered as part of the research. Should you agree to participate, you would be invited to fill in a questionnaire. You may have a chance to be invited to an interview and then to be part of a group of students to discuss and share your experiences. In the questionnaire, you will be asked to fill in the information about your background, your opinions about your vocational programmes, and your perspective on employment. The questionnaire will take less than 15 minutes. In the interview, you will be asked about your educational experiences from the past, your opinions about current programmes in vocational college and your ideas for future plans. The estimate time commitment for the interview would not exceed 60 minutes. In the group, you will be asked to listen other students' stories and share yours as well. With your permission, the interview and focus group would be audio-recorded so that I can ensure that I make an accurate record of what you say.

Participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any stage without giving a reason. Any information already given to me would be destroyed at your request.

Your anonymity and the confidentiality of your responses will be protected to the fullest possible extent. In group meetings, confidentiality will be emphasised and the importance for respect confidentiality will be explained. However, you should be aware that there is no truly guaranteed confidentiality in group meetings. It is possible that your information may be disclosed beyond the group.

Your name and other personal details will be kept in a separate, password-protected computer file from any data that you supply. In the final PhD thesis, you and the other people in the research will be referred by code only. Any references to personal information that might allow someone to guess your identity will be removed. The data collected will be presented within a PhD thesis, and in papers for conferences and publications. The data will be openly available via a data repository. The data will be kept securely in the College of Social Science for 10 years before being destroyed.

Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee.

Should you require any further information, or have any concerns please contact (g.wang.3@research.gla.ac.uk). You can also contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston for any concerns or complaints, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk , or my supervisors: Dr Lesley Doyle, email: LesleyDoyle@glasgow.ac.uk; Prof Vic Lally, email: VictorLally@glasgow.ac.uk.

Appendix 4—Plain Language Statement (for the teaching staff)

The study title: Making choices? The Lives of Vocational college students in China.

The researcher detail: Geng Wang (2280163), School of Education, University of Glasgow.

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

The purpose of the study is to find out how vocational college students make educational and career choices in their lives. It is important because policy makers need to understand vocational students' experiences and opinions but they also need to know the perspectives of parents and staff. Should you agree to participate, you would be invited to an interview. In the interview, you will be asked about your experiences as a parent or a member of staff supporting the students and your opinions about the prevalent attitudes towards vocational college and vocational students. The estimate time commitment for the interview would not exceed 60 minutes. With your permission, the interview would be audio-recorded so that I can ensure that I make an accurate record of what you say.

Participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any stage without giving a reason. Any information already given to me would be destroyed at your request.

Your anonymity and the confidentiality of your responses will be protected to the fullest possible extent. Your name and other personal details will be kept in a separate, password-protected computer file from any data that you supply. In the final PhD thesis, you and the other people in the research will be referred by code only. Any references to personal information that might allow someone to guess your identity will be removed. The data collected will be presented within a PhD thesis, and in papers for conferences and publications. The data will be openly available via a data repository. The data will be kept securely in the College of Social Science for 10 years before being destroyed.

Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee.

Should you require any further information, or have any concerns please contact (g.wang.3@research.gla.ac.uk). You can also contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston for any concerns or complaints, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk , or my supervisors: Dr Lesley Doyle, email: LesleyDoyle@glasgow.ac.uk; Prof Vic Lally, email: VictorLally@glasgow.ac.uk.

Appendix 5—Consent Form

Title of Project: Making choices? The Lives of Vocational college students in China.

Name of Researcher: Geng Wang

Supervisors: Dr Lesley Doyle; Prof Vic Lally

I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation in the questionnaire, interview, focus group is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I consent to interviews and focus group being audio-recorded. The questionnaire and focus groups are participated by students only. (I acknowledge that copies of transcripts will be returned to participants for verification.)

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.

I acknowledge that participants will be identified by name in any publications arising from the research.

·All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
·The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
·The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research
·The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
·I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant …………………………………………Signature……………………………………

Date …………………………………………

Name of Researcher …………………………………………Signature …………………………………

Date …………………………………………

Appendix 6—Questionnaire Results (Question 9 and 10)

Question 9. The main occupation of your father:

	Riverside (public) Percentage	Seaside (Private) Percentage
industrial worker (plant/machine operators; assembly-line operators etc.)	12%	5%
corporate manager or senior official	6%	4%
agricultural or fishery worker	35%	14%
professional (scientists; engineers; health/legal professionals; teachers etc.)	7%	5%
clerk (office clerks; secretaries; typists etc.)	11%	16%
service or sales worker (travel attendants; restaurant service worker; personal care workers; salespersons; street vendors etc.)	0%	2%
government official	0%	7%
private enterprises owner	2%	10%
small business owner	17%	28%
unemployed or semi-unemployed	7%	5%
other	3%	4%
Total	100	100

Question 10. The main occupation of your mother:

	Riverside (Public) Percentage	Seaside (Private) Percentage
industrial worker (plant/machine operators; assembly-line operators etc.)	6%	2%
corporate manager or senior official	2%	4%
agricultural or fishery worker	28%	10%
professional (scientists; engineers; health/legal professionals; teachers etc.)	9%	6%
clerk (office clerks; secretaries; typists etc.)	12%	19%
service or sales worker (travel attendants; restaurant service worker; personal care workers; salespersons; street vendors etc.)	4%	3%
government official	0%	2%
private enterprises owner	3%	6%
small business owner	20%	22%
unemployed or semi-unemployed	10%	15%
other	6%	11%
Total	100	100